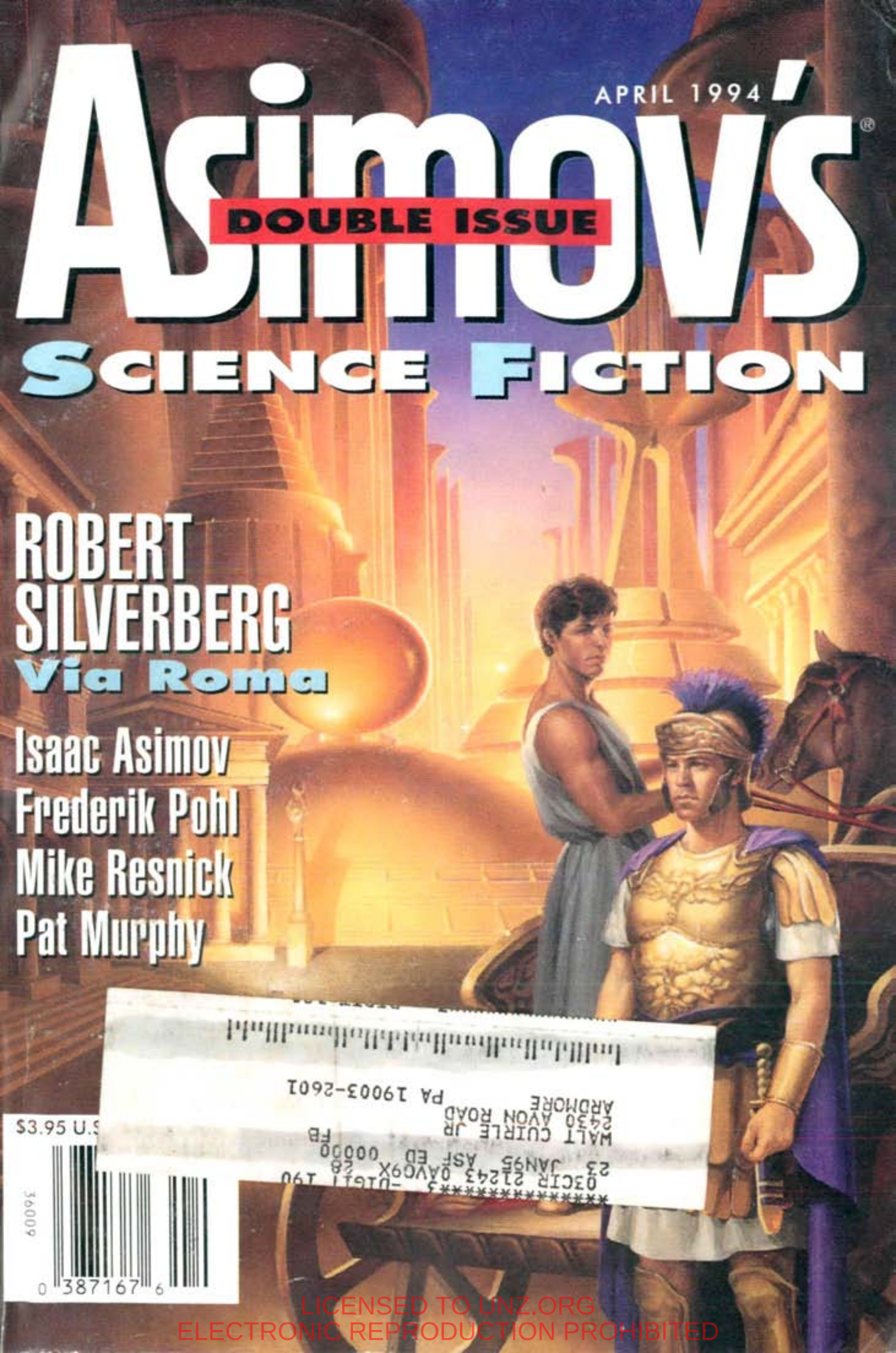


APRIL 1994

Asimov's®

DOUBLE ISSUE

SCIENCE FICTION

ROBERT SILVERBERG
Via Roma

Isaac Asimov
Frederik Pohl
Mike Resnick
Pat Murphy

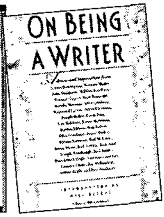
$3.95 U.S

36009

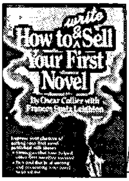
0 387167 6

WRITING FOR
CHILDREN &
TEENAGERS

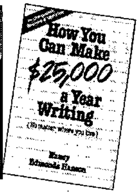
#10335 $16.95


ON BEING
A WRITER

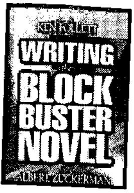
#10336 $19.95


How to Write & Sell Your First Novel
By Oscar Collier with Frances Spatz Leighton

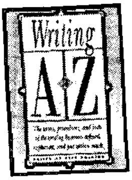
#10293 $18.95


How You Can Make $25,000 a Year Writing
(No matter where you live)
Nancy Edmonds Hanson

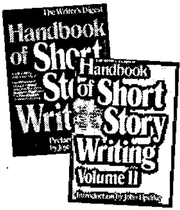
#10328 $18.95


KEN FOLLETT
WRITING
BLOCK
BUSTER
NOVEL
ALBERT ZUCKERMAN

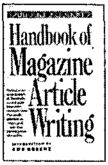
#10393 $17.95


Writing
A to Z

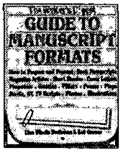
#10329 $24.95


The Writer's Digest
Handbook
of Short
Story
Writing
Handbook
of Short
Story
Writing
Volume II
Introduction by John Updike

Dual: #43057
$25.90
Count as
1 selection.


Handbook of
Magazine
Article
Writing

#10075 $18.95


GUIDE TO
MANUSCRIPT
FORMATS

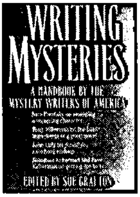
#10025 $18.95

30-MINUTE
WRITER

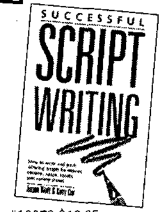
#10350 $17.95

FREEING YOUR
CREATIVITY
A WRITER'S GUIDE

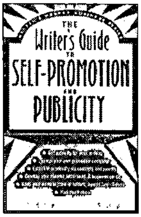
#10281 $17.95


WRITING
MYSTERIES
A HANDBOOK BY THE
MYSTERY WRITERS OF AMERICA
EDITED BY SUE GRAFTON

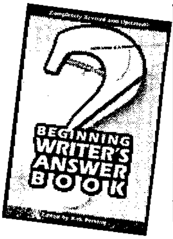
#10286 $18.95


SUCCESSFUL
SCRIPT
WRITING

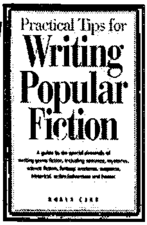
#10072 $18.95


THE
Writer's Guide
TO
SELF-PROMOTION
AND
PUBLICITY

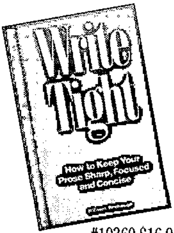
#10183 $16.95


Completely Revised and Updated
BEGINNING
WRITER'S
ANSWER
BOOK

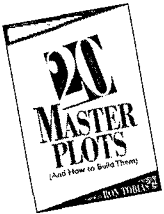
#10394 $16.95


Practical Tips for
Writing
Popular
Fiction

#10313 $17.95


Write
Tight
How to Keep Your
Prose Sharp, Focused
and Concise

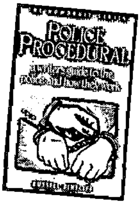
#10360 $16.95


20
MASTER
PLOTS
(And How to Build Them)
RONALD TOBIAS

#10366 $16.95

How to Write Tales of
Horror, Fantasy
& Science Fiction

#10245 $12.95


POLICE
PROCEDURAL
a writer's guide to the
police and how they work

#10374 $16.95

1994
Novel &
Short Story
Writer's
Market

#10361 $19.95

AS A CLUB MEMBER, YOU'LL ENJOY:

- Discounts from 15-65% on every book you buy!
- FREE Bonus Books!
- FREE postage & handling on prepaid orders (after this joining offer)!
- Satisfaction Guaranteed 100%!

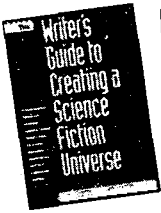
MEMBERSHIP PLAN:

Every month you'll receive the Bulletin offering a Main Selection and 100 or more writing books. If you want the Main Selection, do nothing and it comes automatically. If you want a different book, or want nothing, you'll have 10 days to return your selection card. If you should ever receive an unwanted main selection, you may return it at club expense.

You agree to buy 1 book from the Bulletin in the next six months. After that, you may cancel at any time. Every time you buy a book from the Bulletin, your membership will be renewed for 6 months from the purchase date.

TAKE 2 BOOKS FREE

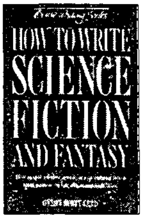
WITH 1 FOR JUST $8.95 WHEN YOU JOIN WRITER'S DIGEST BOOK CLUB!


Writer's Guide to Creating a Science Fiction Universe

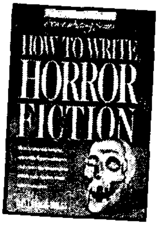
#10349 $18.95

1994
WRITER'S MARKET

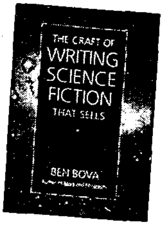
#10339 $26.95


HOW TO WRITE SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

#10181 $13.95


HOW TO WRITE HORROR FICTION

#10212 $15.95


THE CRAFT OF WRITING SCIENCE FICTION THAT SELLS
BEN BOVA

#10395 $16.95

MEMBERSHIP SAVINGS CERTIFICATE

☐ **YES!** I want to join Writer's Digest Book Club. Please sign me up and send me:

My first FREE book #__________ .... **FREE**
and my second FREE book #__________ .... **FREE**
with my third book #__________ for only........$ 8.95
plus postage and handling........$ 4.87
all for just........$ 13.82
(Payment must accompany order. Ohio residents add 49¢ tax; Canadians add 7% GST.)

☐ Check enclosed or Charge my ☐ VISA ☐ MasterCard

Acct # ☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐☐ Exp. Date: ☐☐☐☐

I have read the membership plan and agree to buy 1 more book in the next 6 months.

Signature____________________
required on all certificates

Name____________________

Address____________________

City__________ State____ ZIP________

Writer's Digest
BOOK CLUB

Offer good for new members in U.S. and Canada only. U.S. funds only. Allow 3-4 weeks for delivery. All applications subject to approval.

P.O. Box 12948 Cincinnati, Ohio 45212-0948

WA11

Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION

226

184

Vol. 18 Nos. 4 & 5 (Whole Numbers 214 & 215)
April 1994
Next Issue on Sale
March 29, 1994

Novellas

4 Via Roma — Robert Silverberg
246 Syrtis — Alexander Jablokov

Novelettes

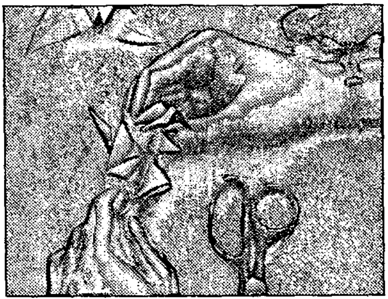
70 Cretaceous Park — Kandis Elliot
92 A Little Knowledge — Mike Resnick
132 Nekropolis — Maureen F. McHugh
202 Original Sin — Phillip C. Jennings

Short Stories

60 March Against the Foe — Isaac Asimov
118 Sabbath of the Zeppelins — Don Webb
166 Messenger — Andrew Weiner
184 Redemption in the Quantum Realm — Frederik Pohl
226 Games of Deception — Pat Murphy
241 The Mask — Michael Swanwick

Poems

183 Heere There Bee Monstyres — David Lunde
200 Piloting Alone out There — Robert Frazier
225 Not a Dick Novel — Lawrence Person



132

92

Departments

304 On Books:
A British Renaissance ________ Norman Spinrad
320 The SF Conventional Calendar ________ Erwin S. Strauss

Stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-two Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have received nine Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *Asimov's* was also the 1993 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

Cover art for "Via Roma" by Pamela Lee

Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977–1992)
Gardner Dozois: Editor
Sheila Williams: Managing Editor
Christoph Haas-Heye: President & Publisher
Terri Czeczko: Art Director

Published every 28 days which includes special issues in April and November by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, at $2.95 per copy ($3.75 per copy in Canada). One year subscription $39.97 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries $49.97, (GST included in Canada) payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscriptions and all other correspondence about them, Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Call 800-333-4108 with questions about your subscription. For back issues send $3.50 to Asimov's Science Fiction, P.O. Box 40, Vernon, NJ 07462. Address for all editorial matters: Asimov's Science Fiction, 1540 Broadway, NY, NY 10036. Asimov's Science Fiction is the registered trademark of Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, © 1994 by Bantam Doubleday Dell Magazines, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260657. POSTMASTER, send change of address to Asimov's Science Fiction, Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN 1055-2146. GST #R123293128

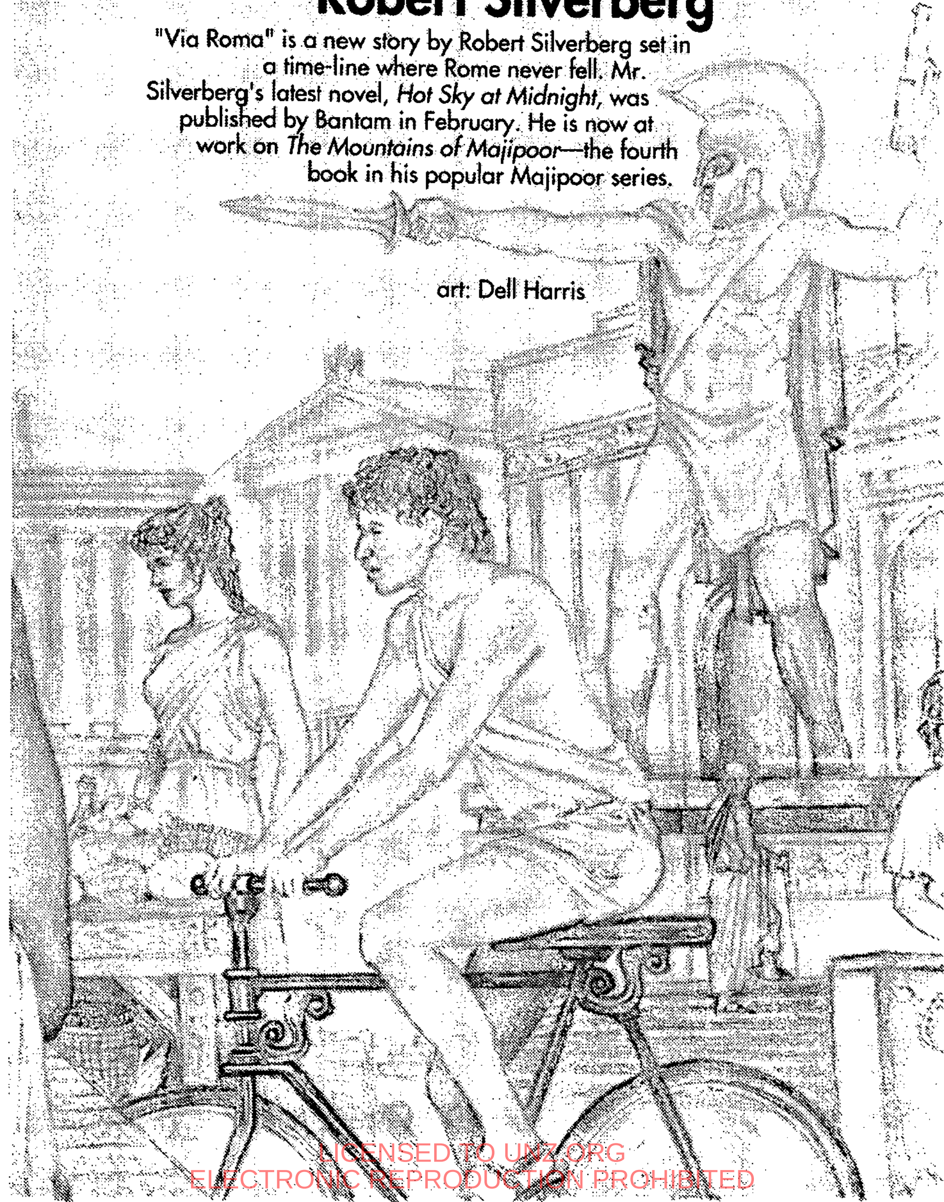
Printed in U.S.A.

VIA ROMA

Robert Silverberg

"Via Roma" is a new story by Robert Silverberg set in a time-line where Rome never fell. Mr. Silverberg's latest novel, *Hot Sky at Midnight,* was published by Bantam in February. He is now at work on *The Mountains of Majipoor*—the fourth book in his popular Majipoor series.

art: Dell Harris



A carriage is waiting for me, by prearrangement, when I disembark at the port in Neapolis after the six-day steamer voyage from Britannia. My father has taken care of all such details for me with his usual efficiency. The driver sees me at once—I am instantly recognizable, great hulking golden-haired barbarian that I am, a giant Nordic pillar towering over this busy throng of small swarthy southern people running to and fro—and cries out to me, *"Signore! Signore! Venga qua, signore."*

But I'm immobilized in that luminous October warmth, staring about me in wonder, stunned by the avalanche of unfamiliar sights and smells. My journey from the dank rainy autumnal chill of my native Britannia into this glorious Italian land of endless summer has transported me not merely to another country but, so it seems, to another world. I am overwhelmed by the intense light, the radiant shimmering air, the profusion of unknown tropical-looking trees. By the vast sprawling city stretching before me along the shores of the Bay of Neapolis. By the lush green hills just beyond, brilliantly bespeckled with the white winter villas of the Imperial aristocracy. And then too there is the great dark mountain far off to my right, the mighty volcano, Vesuvius itself, looming above the city like a slumbering god. I imagine that I can make out a faint gray plume of pale smoke curling upward from its summit. Perhaps while I am here the god will awaken and send fiery rivers of red lava down its slopes, as it has done so many times in the immemorial past.

No, that is not to happen. But there will be fire, yes: a fire that utterly consumes the Empire. And I am destined to stand at the very edge of it, on the brink of the conflagration, and be altogether unaware of everything going on about me: poor fool, poor innocent fool from a distant land.

"Signore! Per favore!" My driver jostles his way to my side and tugs impatiently at the sleeve of my robe, an astonishing transgression against propriety. In Britannia I surely would strike any coachman who did that; but this is not Britannia, and customs evidently are very different here. He looks up imploringly. I'm twice his size. In comic Britannic he says, "You no speak Romano, *signore?* We must leave this place right away. Is very crowded, all the people, the luggage, the everything, I may not remain at the quay once my passenger has been found. It is the law. *Capisce, signore? Capisce?"*

"Si, si, capisco," I tell him. Of course I speak Roman. I spent three weeks studying it in preparation for this journey, and it gave me no trouble to learn. What is it, after all, except a mongrelized and truncated kind of bastard Latin? And everyone in the civilized world knows Latin. *"Andiamo, si."*

He smiles and nods. *"Allora. Andiamo!"*

All around us is chaos—newly arrived passengers trying to find transportation to their hotels, families fighting to keep from being separated in the crush, peddlers selling cheap pocket-watches and packets of crudely tinted picture postcards, mangy dogs barking, ragged children with sly eyes moving among us looking for purses to pick. The roaring babble is astonishing. But we are an island of tranquility in the midst of it all, my driver and I. He beckons me into the carriage: a plush seat, leather paneling, glistening brass fittings, but also an inescapable smell of garlic. Two noble auburn horses stand patiently in their traces. A porter comes running up with my luggage and I hear it being thumped into place overhead. And then we are off, gently jouncing down the quay, out into the bustling city, past the marble waterfront palaces of the customs officials and the myriad other agencies of the Imperial government, past temples of Minerva, Neptune, Apollo, and Jupiter Optimus Maximus, and up the winding boulevards toward the district of fashionable hotels on the slopes that lie midway between the sea and the hills. I will be staying at the Tiberius, on Via Roma, a boulevard which I have been told is the grand promenade of the upper city, the place to see and be seen.

We traverse streets that must be two thousand years old. I amuse myself with the thought that Augustus Caesar himself may have ridden through these very streets long ago, or Nero, or perhaps Claudius, the ancient conqueror of my homeland. Once we are away from the port, the buildings are tall and narrow, grim slender tenements of six and seven stories, built side by side with no breathing space between them. Their windows are shuttered against the midday heat, impenetrable, mysterious. Here and there among them are broader, shorter buildings set in small gardens: huge squat structures, gray and bulky, done in the fussy baroque style of two hundred years ago. They are the palatial homes, no doubt, of the mercantile class, the powerful importers and exporters who maintain the real prosperity of Neapolis. If my family lived here, I suppose we would live in one of those.

But we are Britannic, and our fine airy home sits on a great swath of rolling greensward in the sweet Cornish country, and I am only a tourist here, coming forth from my remote insignificant province for my first visit to great Italia, now that the Second War of Reunification is at last over and travel between the far-flung sectors of the Empire is possible again.

I stare at everything in utter fascination, peering so intensely that my eyes begin to ache. The clay pots of dazzling red and orange flowers fastened to the building walls, the gaudy banners on long posts above the shops, the marketplaces piled high with unfamiliar fruits and vegetables in green and purple mounds. Hanging down along the sides of some of the tenement houses are long blurry scrolls on which the dour lithographed portrait of the old Emperor Laureolus is displayed, or of his newly enthroned young grandson and successor, Maxentius Augustus, with patriotic and adoring inscriptions above and below. This is Loyalist territory: the Neapolitans are said to love the Empire more staunchly than the citizens of Urbs Roma itself.

We have reached the Via Roma. A grand boulevard indeed, grander, I would say, than any in Londin or Parisi: a broad carriageway down the middle bordered with the strange, unnaturally glossy shrubs and trees that thrive in this mild climate, and on both sides of the street the dazzling pink and white marble façades of the great hotels, the fine shops, the apartment buildings of the rich. There are sidewalk cafes everywhere, all of them frantically busy. I hear waves of jolly chatter and bursts of rich laughter rising from them as I pass by, and the sound of clinking glasses. The hotel marquees, arrayed one after the next virtually without a break, cry out the history of the Empire, a roster of great imperial names: the Hadrianus, the Marcus Aurelius, the Augustus, the Maximilianus, the Lucius Agrippa. And at last the Tiberius, neither the grandest nor the least consequential of the lot, a white-fronted building in the Classical Revival style, well situated in a bright district of elegant shops and restaurants.

The desk clerk speaks flawless Britannic. "Your passport, sir?"

He gives it a haughty sniff. Eyes my golden ringlets and long drooping mustachio, compares them with the closer-cropped image of my passport photo, decides that I am indeed myself, Cymbelin Vetruvius Scapulanus of Londin and Caratacus House in Cornwall, and whistles up a *facchino* to carry my bags upstairs. The suite is splendid, two lofty-ceilinged rooms at the corner of the building, a view of the distant harbor on one side and of the volcano on the other. The porter shows me how to operate my bath, points out my night light and my cabinet of liqueurs, officiously tidies my bedspread. I tip the boy with a gold solidus—never let it be said that a Scapulanus of Caratacus House is ungenerous—but he pockets it as coolly as if I have tossed him a copper.

When he is gone, I stand a long while at the windows before unpacking, drinking in the sight of the city and the sparkling bay. I have never beheld anything so magnificent: the wide processional avenues, the temples, the amphitheaters, the gleaming palatial towers, the teeming marketplaces. And this is only Neapolis, the second city of Italia! Next to it, our cherished Londin is a mere muddy provincial backwater. What will great Roma be like, if this is Neapolis?

I feel an oddly disconcerting and unfamiliar sensation that I suspect may be an outbreak of humility. I am a rich man's son, I can trace my ancestry more or less legitimately back to kings of ancient Britain, I have had the benefits of a fine education, with high Cantabrigian honors in history and architecture. But what does any of that matter here? I'm in Italia now, the heartland of the imperishable Empire, and I am nothing but a brawny bumptious Celt from one of the outer edges of the civilized world. These people must think I wear leather kilts at home and rub the grease of pigs into my hair. I can see that I may be going to find myself out of my depth in this land. Which will be a new experience for me; but is that not why I have come here to Italia, to Roma Mater—to open myself to new experiences?

The shops of the Via Roma are closed when I go out for an afternoon stroll, and there is no one to be seen anywhere, except in the crowded cafes and restaurants. In the heat of this place, businesses of all sorts

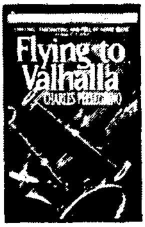
DIANA L. PAXSON

THE WOLF AND THE RAVEN

by Diana L. Paxson

A powerful saga that explores love and treachery as it reinterprets the timeless myth of Sigfrid and Brunahild.

"A heady blend of realism and fabulous legend brought convincingly to life." — Adrian Cole



FLYING TO VALHALLA

by Charles Pellegrino

From the mind of the man responsible for the "Jurassic Park" premise, a first SF novel of an experimental star-drive that leads to first contact with an alien species — and a possible threat to the existence of mankind.

RUDY RUCKER
LIVE ROBOTS

LIVE ROBOTS

by Rudy Rucker

A 2-in-1 reissue of two previous novels, *Wetware* and *Software*, by one of the premier authors in the cyberpunk genre.

"One of cyberpunk's most inventive works." says *Rolling Stone* on *Software*

FUTURE QUARTET

FUTURE QUARTET

by Ben Bova, Frederik Pohl, Jerry Pournelle and Charles Sheffield

Four major award-winning SF authors write essays predicting various possibilities for the world 50 years in the future. Basing their projections on current technological, scientific, environmental and biomedical forecasts, each author offers a unique, startling and eminently probable overview of the future world.

An AvoNova Book/William Morrow Hardcover

COMING IN APRIL 1994

AVONOVA

AVON BOOKS
The Hearst Corporation

shut down at midday and reopen in the cooler hours of early evening. The windows display an amazing array of merchandise from every part of the Empire, Africa, India, Gallia, Hispania, Britannia, even Hither Asia and the mysterious places beyond it, Khitai and Cipangu, where the little strange-eyed people live: clothing of the latest fashions, antique jewelry, fine shoes, household furnishings, costly objects of all sorts. Here is the grand abundance of Imperium, indeed. With the war finally at an end, shipments of luxury goods must converge constantly on Italia from all its resubjugated provinces.

I walk on and on. Via Roma seems endless, extending infinitely ahead of me, onward to the vanishing point of the horizon. But of course it *does* have an end: the street's own name announces its terminal point, Urbs Roma itself, the great capital city. It isn't true, the thing they always say in Italia, that all roads lead to Roma, but this is one that actually does: I need only keep walking northward and this boulevard will bring me eventually to the city of the Seven Hills. There's time for that, though. I must begin my conquest of Italia in easy stages: Neapolis and its picturesque environs first, then a gradual advance northward to meet the formidable challenge of the city of the Caesars.

People are emerging from the cafes now. Some of them turn and stare openly at me, the way I might stare at a giraffe or elephant parading in the streets of Londin. Have they never seen a Briton before? Is yellow hair so alien to them? Perhaps it is my height and the breadth of my shoulders that draws their scrutiny, or my golden earring and the heavy Celtic Revival armlet that I affect. They nudge each other, they whisper, they smile.

I return their smiles graciously as I pass by. *Good afternoon, fellow Roman citizens,* I am tempted to say. But they would probably snicker at my British-accented Latin or my attempts at their colloquial Roman tongue.

There is a message waiting for me at the hotel. My father, bless him, has posted letters of introduction ahead to certain members of the Neapolitan aristocracy whom he has asked to welcome me and ease my entry into Roman society. Before leaving the hotel for my walk I had sent a message announcing my arrival to the people I was meant to meet here, and already there has been a reply. I am invited in the most cordial terms to dine this very evening at the villa of Marcellus Domitianus Frontinus, who according to my father owns half the vineyards between Neapolis and Pompeii and whose brother Cassius was one of the great heroes of the recently concluded war. A carriage will pick me up at the Tiberius at the eighteenth hour.

I am suffused with a strange joy. They are willing to make the visiting barbarian feel welcome on his first night in the mother country. Of course Frontinus ships ten thousand cases of his sweet white wines to my father's warehouses in Londin every year and that is a far from inconsiderable bit of business. Not that business matters will be mentioned this evening. For one thing I know very little of my father's commercial dealings; but also, and this is much more to the point, we are aristocrats, Frontinus and I, and we must behave that way. He is of the ancient Senatorial class, descended from men who made and unmade Caesars a thousand years ago. And I carry the blood of British kings in my veins, or at least my father says I do and my own name—Cymbelin—proclaims it. Caratacus, Cassevelaunus, Tincommius, Togodumnus, Prasutagus: at one time or another I have heard my father claim descent from each of those grand old Celtic chieftains, and Queen Cartamandua of the Brigantes for good measure.

Well, and Cartamandua expediently signed a treaty with the Roman invaders of her country, and sent her fellow monarch Caratacus to Roma in chains. But all that was a long time ago, and we Britons have been pacified and repacified on many occasions since then, and everyone understands that the power and the glory will reside, now and always, in the great city that lies at the other end of the Via Roma from here. Frontinus will be polite to me, I know: if not for the sake of the heroic though unvictorious warriors who are my putative ancestors, then for the ten thousand cases of wine that he means to ship to Londin next year. I will dine well tonight, I will meet significant people, I will be offered easy entree to the great homes of Neapolis and, when I am ready to go there, the Capital as well.

I bathe. I shave. I oil my ringlets, and not with the grease of pigs; and I select my clothing with great care, a silken Byzantine tunic and matching neckerchief, fine leggings of scarlet Aiguptian linen, sandals of the best Syrian workmanship. With, of course, my golden earring and my massive armlet to provide that interestingly barbaric touch for which they will value me more highly.

The carriage is waiting when I emerge from the hotel. A Nubian driver in crimson and turquoise; white Arabian horses; the carriage itself is of ebony inlaid with strips of ivory. Worthy, I would think, of an Emperor. But Frontinus is only a wealthy patrician, a mere southerner at that. What do the Caesars ride in, I wonder, if this is the kind of vehicle a Frontinus sends to pick up visiting young men from the backward provinces?

The road winds up into the hills. A cloud has drifted over the city and the early evening sunlight tumbles through it like golden rain. The surface of the bay is ablaze with light. Mysterious gray islands are visible in the distance.

The villa of Marcellus Domitianus Frontinus is set in a park so big it takes us fifteen minutes to reach the house once we are past the colossal iron gate. It is a light and graceful pavilion, of enormous size that is carefully masked by the elegance of its design, set on the very edge of a lofty slope. There is a look of deceptive fragility about it, as though it would be sensitive to the slightest movements of the atmosphere. The view from its portico runs from Vesuvius in the east to some jutting cape far off down the other shore of the bay. All around it are marvelous shrubs and trees in bloom, and the fragrance they exhale is the fragrance of unthinkable wealth. I begin to wonder how much those ten thousand cases of wine can matter to this man.

Yet Frontinus himself is earthy and amiable, a stocky balding man with an easy grin and an immediately congenial style.

He is there to greet me as I step down from the carriage. "I am Marcello Domiziano," he tells me, speaking Roman, grinning broadly as he puts out his hand. "Welcome to my house, dear friend Cymbelin!"

Marcello Domiziano. He uses the Roman, not the Latin, form of his name. In the provinces, of course, we pretentiously allow ourselves Latin names, mingling them to some degree with Britannic or Gallic or Teutonic localisms; but here in Italia the only people who have the privilege of going by names in the ancient Latin mode are members of the Senatorial and Imperial families and high military officers, and the rest must employ the modern Roman form. Frontinus rises above his own privilege of rank: I may call him Marcello, the way I would one of his field hands. And he will call me Cymbelin. Very swiftly we are dear friends, or so he wants me to feel, and I have barely arrived.

The gathering is under way already, on a breeze-swept open patio with a terrazzo floor, looking outward toward the city center far below. Fifteen, perhaps twenty people, handsome men, stunning women, everyone laughing and chattering like the people in the sidewalk cafes.

"My daughter Adriana," Frontinus says. "Her friend Lucilla, visiting from Roma."

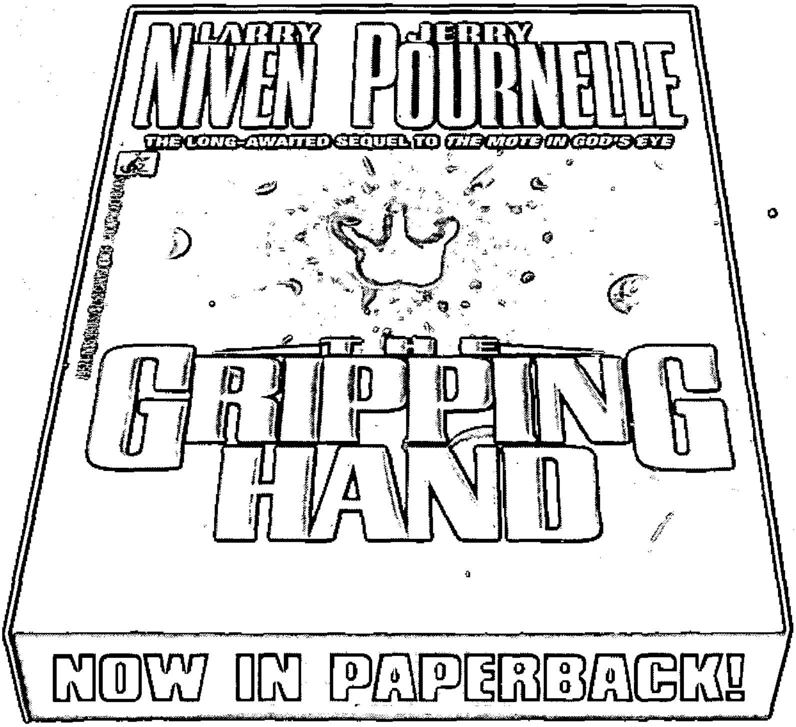
They are extraordinarily beautiful. The two of them surround me and I am dazzled. I remember once in Gallia, at a great villa somewhere near Nemausus, I was led by my host into the heart of a mirror-maze that he had built for his amusement, and instantly I felt myself toppling dizzily forward, vanishing between the infinitely reduplicated images, and had to pull myself back with an effort, heart pounding, head spinning.

It is like that now, standing between these two girls. Their beauty dazes me, their perfume intoxicates me. Frontinus has moved away, leaving me unsure of which is the daughter and which is the friend; I look from one to the other, confused.

The girl to my left is full-bodied and robust, with sharp features, pale skin, and flaming red hair arrayed close to her skull in tight coils, an antique style that might have been copied from some ancient wall painting. The other, taller, is dark and slender, almost frail, with heavy rows of blue faience beads about her throat and shadowy rings painted beneath her eyes. For all her flimsiness she is very sleek, soft-skinned, with a glossy Aiguptian look about her. The red-haired one must be Frontinus's daughter, I decide, comparing her sturdy deep-chested frame to his; but no, no, she is the visitor from Roma, for the taller, darker one says, speaking not Roman but Latin, and in a voice smooth as Greek honey, "You do honor to our house, distinguished sir. My father says that you are of royal birth."

I wonder if I am being mocked. But I see the way she is measuring me

The long-awaited sequel to
The Mote in God's Eye


LARRY NIVEN
JERRY POURNELLE
THE LONG-AWAITED SEQUEL TO THE MOTE IN GOD'S EYE
THE GRIPPING HAND
NOW IN PAPERBACK!

Robert Heinlein called *The Mote in God's Eye* "possibly the finest science fiction novel I have ever read." Now, eighteen years later, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle take us back to the closely guarded solar system called the Mote to continue their epic story of humans, aliens and the clash of civilizations.

"Worth waiting eighteen years for!"
–Tom Clancy

POCKET BOOKS
A Paramount Communications Company

Wherever paperbacks are sold

with her eyes, running over my length and breadth as though I am a statue in some museum's hall of kings. The other one is doing the same.

"I carry a royal name, at any rate," I say. "Cymbelin—you may know him as Cunobelinus, in the history books. Whose son was the warrior king Caratacus, captured and pardoned by the first Emperor Claudius. My father has gone to great pains to have our genealogy traced to their line."

I smile disarmingly; and I see that they take my meaning precisely. I am describing the foolish pretensions of a rich provincial merchant, nothing more.

"How long ago was that, actually?" asks the redhead, Lucilla.

"The genealogical study?"

"The capturing and pardoning of your great ancestor."

"Why—" I hesitate. Haven't I just said that it was in the time of Claudius the First? But she flutters her eyes at me as though she is innocent of any historical information. "About eighteen centuries ago," I tell her. "When the Empire was still new. Claudius the First was the fourth of the Caesars. The fifth, if you count Julius Caesar as an Emperor. Which I think is the proper thing to do."

"How precise you are about such things," Adriana Frontina says, laughing.

"About historical matters, yes. About very little else, I'm afraid."

"Will you be traveling widely in Italia?" asks Lucilla.

"I'll want to see the area around Neapolis, of course. Pompeii and the other old ruins, and a few days on the isle of Capreae. Then up to Roma, certainly, and maybe farther north—Etruria, Venetia, even as far up as Mediolanum. Actually, I want to see it all."

"Perhaps we can tour it together," Lucilla says. Just like that, bluntly, baldly. And now there is no flutter of innocence whatever in her wide-set, intelligent eyes, only a look of unmistakable mischief.

Of course I have heard that the women of Roma are that way. I am startled, all the same, by her forwardness, and for the moment I can find no reply; and then all the others come flocking around me. Marcellus Frontinus bombards me with introductions, reciting name after name, spilling them forth so quickly that it's impossible for me to match name to face.

"Enrico Giunio, the Count of Pausylipon, and Countess Emilia. My son Druso Tiberio, and his friend Ezio. Quintillo Fabio Puteolano. Vitellio di Portofino, his wife Claudia, their daughter Crispina. Traiano Gordiano Tertullo, of Capreae—Marco Ulpio Africano—Sabina Metella Arboria—" A blur of names. There is no end to them. One alone out of all of them registers with real impact on me: "My brother Cassio," Frontinus says. A slender, olive-skinned man with eyes like bits of polished coal: the great war hero, this is, Cassius Lucius Frontinus! I begin to salute him, but Frontinus rattles out four more introductions before I can. People seem to be materializing out of thin air. To Adriana I whisper, "Has your father invited all of Neapolis here tonight?"

"Only the interesting ones," she says. "It isn't every day that a British king visits us." And giggles.

Swarms of servants—slaves?—move among us, bringing things to eat and drink. I am cautious in the first few rounds, reminding myself that this is only my first day here and that the fatigue of my journey may lead me into embarrassments, but then, to avoid seeming impolite, I select a goblet of wine and a small meat-cake, and hold them without tasting them, occasionally lifting them to my mouth and lowering them again untouched.

The high lords and ladies of Neapolitan society surround me in swirling clusters, peppering me with questions to which they don't really appear to be expecting answers. Some speak in Roman, some in Latin. How long will I be here? Will I spend my entire time in Neapolis? What has aroused my interest in visiting Italia? Is the economy of Britannia currently flourishing? Does everyone speak only Britannic there, or is Latin widely used also? Is there anything in Britannia that a traveler from Italia would find rewarding to see? How does British food compare with Italian food? Do I think that the current Treaty of Unity will hold? Have I been to Pompeii yet? To the Greek temples at Paestum? On and on. It is a bombardment. I make such replies as I can, but the questions overlap my answers in a highly exhausting way. I am grateful for my stout constitution. Even so, after a time I become so weary that I begin to have trouble understanding their quick, idiomatic Roman, and I revert entirely to the older, purer Latin tongue, hoping it will encourage them to do the same. Some do, some don't.

Lucilla and Adriana remain close by my side throughout the ordeal, and I am grateful for that also.

These people think of me as a new toy, I realize. The novelty of the hour, to be examined in fascination for a little while and then discarded.

The wind off the bay has turned chilly with the coming of evening, and somehow, almost imperceptibly, the gathering has moved indoors and upstairs, to a huge room overlooking the atrium that will apparently be our banqueting hall.

"Come," Adriana says. "You must meet Uncle Cassio."

The famous general is far across the room, standing with arms folded, listening impassively while his brother and another man carry on what seems to be a fierce argument. He wears a tightly cut khaki uniform and his breast is bedecked with medals and ribbons. The other man, I remember after a moment, is the Count of Pausylipon, whom Frontinus had so casually referred to as "Enrico Giunio." He is gaunt, tall—nearly as tall as I am—hawk-faced, animated: his expression seems close to apoplectic. Marcello Domiziano is just as excited, neck straining upward, face pushed close to the other's, arms pinwheeling in emphatic gesticulations. I get the sense that these two have been bitterly snarling and snapping at each other over some great political issue for years.

Despite all the furor going on at his elbow, it appears almost as though the famous general is asleep on his feet—a knack that must be useful during lulls in long battles—except that every few moments, in response, I suppose, to some provocative remark by one combatant or the other, his eyelids widen and a brilliant, baleful glare is emitted by those remarkable coal-bright eyes. I feel hesitant about joining this peculiar group. But Adriana steers me over to them.

Frontinus cries, "Yes, yes, Cymbelin! Come meet my brother!" He has noticed my hesitation also. But perhaps he would welcome an interruption of the hostilities.

Which I provide. The dispute, the discussion, whatever it is, evaporates the moment I get there, turning into polite vaporous chit-chat. The Count, having calmed himself totally, an impressive display of aristocratic self-control, offers me a lofty, remote nod of acknowledgment, gives Adriana and Lucilla a pat on the shoulder apiece, and excuses himself to go in search of a fresh drink. Frontinus, still a little red in the face but cheerful as ever, commends me to his brother's attention with an upturned palm. "Our British friend," he says.

"I am honored, your Excellence," I say, making a little bow to Cassius Lucius Frontinus.

"Oh, none of that, now," says Uncle Cassio. "We aren't in the camp." He speaks in Latin. His voice is thin and hard, like the edge of a knife, but I sense that he's trying to be genial.

For a moment I am giddy with awe, simply at finding myself in his presence. I think of this little man—and that is what he is, little, as short as his brother and very much slighter of build—striding untiringly from Dacia to Gallia and back in seven-league boots, putting out the fires of secession everywhere. The indomitable general, the savior of the Empire.

There will be fire of a different sort ablaze in the Empire soon, and I am standing very close to its source. But I have no awareness of that just yet.

Cassius Frontinus surveys me as though measuring me for a uniform. "Tell me, are all you Britons that big?"

"I'm a bit larger than average, actually."

"A good thing. We came very close to invading you, you know, very early in the war. It wouldn't have been any picnic, facing a whole army of men your size."

"Invading Britannia, sir?" Lucilla asks.

"Indeed," he says, giving the girl a quick chilly smile. "A pre-emptive strike, when we thought Britannia might be toying with joining the rebellion."

I blink at him in surprise and some irritation. This is a sore place for us: why is he rubbing it?

Staunchly I say, "That would never have happened, sir. We are Loyalists, you know, we Britons."

"Yes. Yes, of course you are. But the risk was there, after all. A fifty-fifty chance, is the way it seemed to us then. It was a touchy time. And

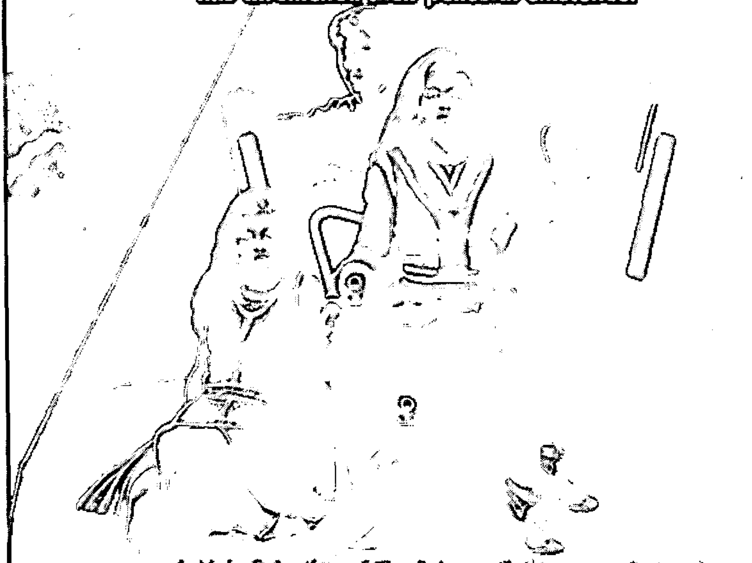
The spellbinding saga of The Rowan, Damia and their extraordinary families continues...

ANNE McCAFFREY

The New York Times bestselling author of DAMIA'S CHILDREN

LYON'S PRIDE

The Rowan was the most powerful telepath within the Alliance—until the birth of her daughter Damia. Now Damia, her husband Afra Lyon, and their children have become the strongest force among the planets. And it will take the combined talents of all the Lyon clan to pursue and destroy a deadly enemy that has threatened their peaceful existence.



A Main Selection of The Science Fiction Book Club

ACE/PUTNAM

the High Command thought, let's send a few legions over there, just to keep them in line. Before your time, I suppose."

I'm still holding my goblet of wine, still untasted. Now, nervously, I take a deep draught.

Against all propriety I feel impelled to defend my race. With preposterous stiffness I say, "Let me assure you, general, that I am not as young as you may think, and I can tell you that there was never the slightest possibility that Britannia would have gone over to the rebels. None."

A flicker of—amusement?—annoyance?—in those terrible eyes, now.

"In hindsight, yes, certainly. But it looked quite otherwise to us, for a while, there at the very beginning. Just how old were you when the war broke out, my lad?"

I hate being patronized. I let him see my anger.

"Seventeen, sir. I served in the Twelfth Britannic Legion, under Aelius Titianus Rigisamus. Saw action in Gallia and Lusitania. The Balloon Corps."

"Ah." He isn't expecting that. "Well, then. I've misjudged you."

"My entire nation, I would say. Whatever rumors of British disloyalty you may have heard in that very confused time were nothing but enemy fabrications."

"Ah, indeed," says the general. "Indeed." His tone is benign, but his eyes are brighter and stonier than ever and his jaws barely move as he says the words.

Adriana Frontina, looking horrified at the growing heat of our exchanges, is frantically signaling me with her eyes to get off the subject. Her red-haired friend Lucilla, though, merely seems amused by the little altercation. Marcellus Frontinus has turned aside, probably not coincidentally, and is calling instructions to some servants about getting the banquet under way.

I plunge recklessly onward, nonetheless. "Sir, we Britons are just as Roman as anyone in the Empire. Or do you think we still nurse private national grievances going back to the time of Claudius?"

Cassius Frontinus is silent a moment, studying me with some care.

"Yes," he says, finally. "Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. But that's beside the point. Everybody who got swept up into the Empire once upon a time and never was able to find their way out again has old grievances buried somewhere, no matter how Roman they claim to be now. The Teutons, the Britons, the Hispaniards, the Frogs, everyone. That's why we've had two nasty breakups of the system in not much more than a century, wouldn't you say? But no, boy, I didn't mean to impugn the loyalty of your people, not in the slightest. This has all been highly unfortunate. A thousand pardons, my friend."

He glances at my goblet, which I have somehow drained without noticing.

"You need another drink, is that not so? And so do I." He snaps his fingers at a passing servitor. "Boy! Boy! More wine, over here!"

I have a certain sense that my conversation with the great war hero

Cassius Lucius Frontinus has not been a success, and that this might be a good moment to withdraw. I shoot a helpless glance at Adriana, who understands at once and says, "But Cymbelin has taken enough of your time, Uncle. And look, the praefectus urbi has arrived: we really must introduce our guest to him."

Yes. They really must, before I make a worse botch of things. I bow again and excuse myself, and Adriana takes me by one arm and Lucilla seizes the other, and they sweep me away off to the opposite side of the great hall.

"Was I very horrid?" I ask.

"Uncle likes men who show some spirit," Adriana says. "In the army nobody dares talk back to him at all."

"But to be so rude—he the great man that he is, and I just a visitor from the provinces—"

"He was the one that was rude," says Lucilla hotly. "Calling your people traitors to the Empire! How could he have said any such thing!" And then, in a lower voice, purring directly into my ear: "I'll take you to Pompeii tomorrow. It won't be nearly so boring for you there."

She calls for me at the hotel after breakfast, riding in an extraordinarily grand quadriga, mahogany-trimmed and silk-tasseled and gilded all over, drawn by two magnificent white horses and two gigantic duns. It makes the one that Marcellus Frontinus sent for me the night before seem almost shabby. I had compared that one to the chariot of an Emperor; but no, I was altogether wrong: surely this is closer to the real thing.

"Is this what you traveled down from Roma in?" I ask her.

"Oh, no, I came by train. I borrowed the chariot from Druso Tiberio. He goes in for things of this sort."

At the party I had had only the briefest of encounters with young Frontinus and was highly unimpressed with him: a soft young man, pomaded and perfumed, three or four golden rings on each hand, languid movements and delicate yawns, distinctly a prince. Shamelessly exchanging melting glances all evening long with his handsome friend Ezio, who seemed as stupid as a gladiator and probably once was one.

"What can a quadriga like this cost?" I ask. "Five million sesterces? Ten million?"

"Very likely even more."

"And he simply *lends* it to you for the day?"

"Oh, it's only his second best one, wouldn't you know? Druso's a rich man's son, after all, very spoiled. Marcello doesn't deny him a thing. I think it's terrible, of course."

"Yes," I say. "Dreadful."

If Lucilla picks up the irony in my voice, she gives no sign of it.

"And yet, if he's willing to lend one of his pretty chariots to his sister's friend for a day or two—"

"Why not take it, eh?"

"Why not indeed."

And so off we go down the coast road together, this lovely voluptuous red-haired stranger from Roma and I, riding toward Pompeii in a quadriga that would have brought a blush to the cheek of a Caesar. Traffic parts for us on the highway as though it *is* the chariot of a Caesar, and the horses streak eastward and then southward with the swiftness of the steeds of Apollo, clipclopping along the wide, beautifully paved road at a startling pace.

Lucilla and I sit chastely far apart, like the well-bred young people that we are, chatting pleasantly but impersonally about the party.

"What was all that about," she says, "the quarrel that you and Adriana's uncle were having last night?"

"It wasn't a quarrel. It was—an unpleasantness."

"Whatever. Something about the Roman army invading Britannia to make sure you people stayed on our side in the war. I know so little about these things. You weren't *really* going to secede, were you?"

We have been speaking Roman, but if we are going to have this discussion I must use a language in which I feel more at home. So I switch to Latin and say, "Actually, I think it was a pretty close thing, though it was cruel of him to say so. Or simply boorish."

"Military men. They have no manners."

"It surprised me all the same. To fling it in my face like that—!"

"So it was true?"

"I was only a boy when it was happening, you understand. But yes, I know there was a substantial anti-Imperial faction in Londin fifteen or twenty years ago."

"Who wanted to restore the Republic, you mean?"

"Who wanted to pull out of the Empire," I say. "And elect a king of our own blood. If such a thing as our own blood can be said still to exist in any significant way among Britons, after eighteen hundred years as Roman citizens."

"I see. So they wanted an independent Britannia."

"They saw a chance for it. This was only about twenty years after the Empire had finished cleaning up the effects of the first collapse, you know. And then suddenly a second civil war seemed likely to begin."

"That was in the East, wasn't it?"

I wonder how much she really knows about these matters. More than she is letting on, I suspect. But I have come down from Cantabrigia with honors in history, after all, and I suppose she is trying to give me a chance to be impressive.

"In Syria and Persia, yes, and the back end of India. Just a little frontier rebellion, not even white people that were stirring up the fuss: ten legions could have put the whole thing down. But the Emperor Laureolus was already old and sick—senile, in fact—and no one in the administration was paying attention to the outer provinces, and the legions weren't sent in until it was too late. So there was a real mess to deal with, all of a sudden. And right in the middle of that, Hispania and

Gallia and even silly little Lusitania decided to secede from the Empire again too. So it was 2563 all over again, a second collapse even more serious than the first one."

"And Britannia was going to pull out also, this time."

"That was what the rabble was urging, at any rate. There were some noisy demonstrations in Londin, and posters went up outside the proconsul's palace telling him to go back to Roma, things like that: *'Britannia for the Britons!'* Throw the Romans out and bring back the old Celtic monarchy, is what people were yelling. Well, of course, we couldn't have that, and we shut them up very quickly indeed, and when the war began and our moment came, we fought as bravely as any Romans anywhere."

" 'We'?" she says.

"The decent people of Britannia. The intelligent people."

"The propertied people, you mean?"

"Well, of course. We understood how much there was to lose—not just for us, for everyone in Britannia—if the Empire should fall. What's our best market? Italia! And if Britannia, Gallia, Hispania, and Lusitania managed to secede, Italia would lose its access to the sea, it would be locked up in the middle of Europe with one set of enemies blocking the land route to the east and the other set closing off the ocean to the west. The heart of the Empire would wither. We Britons would have no one to sell our goods to, unless we started shipping them westward to Nova Roma and trying to peddle them to the redskins. The breakup of the Empire would cause a worldwide depression—famine, civil strife, absolute horror everywhere. The worst of the suffering would have fallen on the people who were yelling loudest for secession."

She gives me an odd look.

"Your own family claims royal Celtic blood, and you have a fancy Celtic name. So it would seem that your people like to look back nostalgically to the golden days of British freedom before the Roman conquest. But even so you helped to put down the secessionist movement in your province."

Is she mocking me too? I am so little at ease among these Romans.

A trifle woodenly I say, "Not I, personally. I was still only a boy when the anti-Imperial demonstrations were going on. But yes, for all his love of Celtic lore my father has always believed that we had to put the interests of Roman civilization in general ahead of our petty little nationalistic pride. When the war did reach us, Britannia was on the Loyalist side, thanks in good measure to him. And as soon as I was old enough, I joined the legions and did my part for the Empire."

"You love the Emperor, then?"

"I love the Empire. I believe the Empire is a necessity. As for this particular Emperor that we have now—" I hesitate. I should be careful here. "We have had more capable ones, I suppose."

Lucilla laughs. "My father thinks that Maxentius is an utter idiot!"

"Actually, so does mine. Well, but Emperors come and go, and some are better than others. What's important is the survival of the Empire.

And for every Nero, there's a Vespasian, sooner or later. For every Caligula, there's a Flavius Romulus. And for every weak and silly Maxentius—"

"Shh," Lucilla says, pointing to our coachman then to her ears. "We ought to be more cautious. Perhaps we're saying too much that's indiscreet, love. We don't want to do that."

"No. Of course not."

"Doing something indiscreet, now—"

"Ah. That's different."

"Very different," she says. And we both laugh.

We are passing virtually under the shadow of great Vesuvius now. Imperceptibly we have moved closer to each other while talking, and gradually I have come to feel the pressure of her warm thigh against mine.

Now, as the chariot takes a sharp turn of the road, she is thrown against me. Ostensibly to steady her, I slip my arm around her shoulders and she nestles her head in the hollow of my neck. My hand comes to rest on the firm globe of her breast. She lets it remain there.

We reach the ruins of Pompeii in time for a late lunch at a luxurious hostelry just at the edge of the excavation zone. Over a meal of grilled fish and glittering white wine we make no pretense of hiding our hunger for one another. I am tempted to suggest that we skip the archaeology and go straight to our room.

But no, no chance of that, a guide that she has hired is waiting for us after lunch, an excitable little bald-headed Greek who is bubbling with eagerness to convey us into the realm of antiquity. So off we go into the torrid Pompeiian afternoon, full of wine and lust, and he marches us up one dry stony street and down the next, showing us the great sights of the city that the volcano engulfed eighteen hundred years ago in the second month of the reign of the Emperor Titus.

It's terribly fascinating, actually. We modern Romans have the illusion that we still continue to design our cities and houses very much in the style of the ancients; but in fact the changes, however gentle they may be from one century to the next, have been enormous, and Pompeii—sealed away under volcanic debris eighteen centuries ago and left untouched until its rediscovery just a few decades ago—seems truly antique. Our bubbly Greek shows us the homes of the rich with their sumptuous paintings and statuary, the baths, the amphitheater, the forum. He takes us into the sweaty little whorehouse, where we see vivid murals of heavy-thighed prostitutes energetically pleasuring their clients, and Lucilla giggles into my ear and lightly tickles the palm of my hand with her fingertip. I'm ready to conclude the tour right then and there, but of course it can't be done: there is ever so much more to see, our relentless guide declares.

Outside the Temple of Jupiter Lucilla asks me, all innocence, "What gods do you people worship in Britannia? The same that we do?"

"The very same, yes. Jupiter, Juno, Apollo, Mithra, Cybele, all the usual ones, the ones that you have here."

"Not special prehistoric pagan gods of your own?"

"What do you imagine we are? Savages?"

"Of course, darling! Of course! Great lovely golden-haired savages!"

There is a gleam in her eye. She is teasing, but she means what she says, as well. I know she does.

And she too has hit a vulnerable point; for despite all our Roman airs, we Britons are *not* really as much like these people as we would like to think, and we *do* have our own little lingering ancient allegiances. Not I myself, particularly; for such religious needs as I may have, Jupiter and Mercury are quite good enough. But I have friends at home, quite close friends, who sacrifice most sincerely to Branwen and Velaunus, to Rhiannon and Brighida, to Ancasta, to the Matres. And even I have gone—once, at least—to the festival of the Llew-nasadh, where they worship Mercury Lugus under his old British name of Llew.

But it is all too foolish, too embarrassing, worshipping those crude old wooden gods in their nests of straw. Not that Apollo and Mercury seem any less absurd to me, or Mithra, or any of the dozens of bizarre Eastern gods that have been going in and out of fashion in Roma for centuries, Baal and Marduk and Jehovah and the rest. They are all equally meaningless to me. And yet there are times when I feel a great vacancy inside of me, as I look up at the stars, wondering how and why they all were made, and not knowing, not having even the first hint.

I don't want to speak of such things with her. These are private matters.

But her playful question about our local gods has wounded me. I am abashed; I am red-cheeked with shame at my own Britishness, which I have sensed almost from the start is one of the things about me, perhaps the most important thing, that makes me interesting to her.

We leave the ruins, finally.

We return to our hotel. We go to our room. Our suite has a terrace overlooking the excavations, a bedroom painted with murals in the Pompeiian style, a marble bath big enough for six. We undress each other with deliberate lack of haste. Lucilla's body is strongly built, broad through the hips and shoulders, full in buttock and breast and thigh: to me an extremely beautiful body, but perhaps she inwardly fears that it lacks elegance. Her skin is marvelous, pale as fine silk, with the lightest dusting of charming pink freckles across her chest and the tops of her shoulders, and—an oddity that I find very diverting—her pubic hair is black as night, the starkest possible contrast to the fiery crimson hair higher up.

She sees the direction of my gaze.

"I don't dye it," she informs me. "It just came that way, I don't know why."

"And this?" I say, placing my finger lightly on the tattoo of a pine tree that runs along the inside of her right thigh. "A birthmark, is it?"

"The priests of Atys put it there, when I was initiated."

"The Phrygian god?"

"I go to his temple, yes. Now and then. In springtime, usually."

So she has indeed played a little game with me.

"Atys! A devotee of Atys of Phrygia! Oh, Lucilla, Lucilla! You had the audacity to tell me that you think Britons are savages because some of us worship pagan gods. While all the time you had the mark of Atys on your own skin, right next to your—your—"

"To my what, love? Go on, say its name."

I say it in Britannic. She repeats it, savoring the word, so strange to her ears, so barbaric.

"Now kiss it," she says.

"Gladly," I tell her, and I drop to my knees and do. Then I sweep her up in my great barbaric arms and carry her to the bath, and lower her gently into it, and lie down beside her myself. We soak for a time; and then we wash each other, laughing; and then, still wet, we spring from the tub and race toward the bed. She is looking for savagery, and I give her savagery, all right, hearty barbarian caresses that leave her gasping in unintelligible bursts of no doubt obscene Roman; and what she gives me in return is the subtle and artful Roman manner of loving, tricks going back to Caesar's time, cunning ripplings of the interior muscles and sly strokes of the fingertips that drive me to the edge of madness; and no sooner have we done with each other than we find ourselves beginning all over again.

"My wild man," she murmurs. "My Celt!"

From Pompeii we proceed down the coast to Surrentum, a beautiful seaside town set amid groves of orange and lemon trees. We tell our driver to wait for us there for a couple of days, and take the ferry across to the romantic isle of Capreae, playground of Emperors. Lucilla has wired ahead to book a room for us at one of the best hotels, a hilltop place called the Punta Tragara that has, she says, a magnificent view of the harbor. She has been to Capreae before. With whom, I wonder, and how many times.

Lucilla and I lie naked on the terrace of our room, reclining on thick sheepskin mats, enjoying the mild autumn evening. The sky and the sea are the same shade of gray-blue. It's hard to tell where the boundary lies between the one and the other. Thickly wooded cliffs rise vertically from the water just across from us. Heavy-winged birds swoop through the dusk. In town, far below, the first lights of evening begin to shimmer.

"I don't even know your name," I say, after a while.

"Of course you do. It's Lucilla."

"You know what I mean."

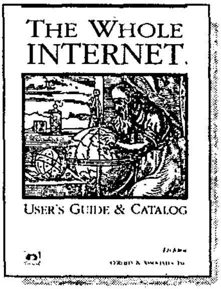
"Lucilla Junia Scaevola," she says.

"Scaevola? Related to the famous *Consul* Scaevola, by any chance?"

I'm only making idle talk. Scaevola is hardly an uncommon Roman name, of course.

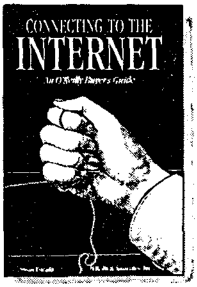
Get Connected.

You've read about cyberspace in classics from William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. That's still science-fiction, but it's not far off, once world-wide networking comes together with "virtual reality."



Here's a book on the technology as it is now– a comprehensive introduction to the international network of computer systems called the "Internet." The "Internet" is more than just a single network; it's the nexus of virtually every computer network in the world. Whether you're a researcher, a student, or just someone who likes to send electronic mail to friends, the Internet is a global resource of almost unimaginable wealth.

The Whole Internet Catalog & User's Guide covers the basic utilities that you use to access the network (telnet, ftp, mail and news readers). But it also does much more. This guide pays close attention to several important "information servers" (Archie, Wais, Gopher) that are, essentially, databases of databases: they help you find what you want among the millions of files and thousands of archives available. We've also included our own "database of databases" – a resource index that covers a broad selection of several hundred important resources found on the net, ranging from the King James Bible to the CIA World Factbook. Even if you've been around the net for a few years, you'll still be able to discover resources that you didn't know existed.



If you're not yet on the Internet, *Connecting To The Internet* provides practical advice on how to get connected. It helps you assess your needs to determine the kind of Internet service that is best for you. Then it describes how to find local access providers and evaluate the services they offer.

So if you use the Internet for work or for pleasure –or if you'd like to, but don't know how – these are the books for you.

The Whole Internet User's Guide & Catalog
By Ed Krol, 400 pages, ISBN: 1-56592-025-2, $24.95

Connecting to the Internet: An O'Reilly Buyer's Guide
By Susan Estrada, 1st Edition August 1993, 188 pages, ISBN: 1-56592-061-9, $15.95

O'Reilly & Associates, Inc.

103A Morris St., Sebastopol, CA 95472 • (800) 998-9938 • (707) 829-0515 • Fax (707) 829-0104
order@ora.com
A42S

"He's my uncle Gaius," she says. "You'll get to meet him when we go up to Roma. Adriana adores him, and so will you."

Her casual words leave me thunderstruck. Consul Scaevola's niece, lying naked here beside me?

Gods! These girls and their famous uncles! Uncle Gaius, Uncle Cassius. I am in heady company. The whole Roman world knows Gaius Junius Scaevola—chosen many times as Consul, three terms, perhaps four, the most recent time just a couple of years before. By all accounts he's the second most powerful man in the realm, the great strong figure who stands behind the wobbly young Emperor Maxentius and keeps him propped up. *My Uncle Gaius,* this one says, so very simply and sweetly. I'll have quite a lot to tell my father when I get back to Cornwall.

Consul Scaevola's niece rears up above me and dangles her breasts in my face. I kiss their pink patrician tips and she drops down on top of me like one of those fierce swooping birds descending on its prey.

In the cool of the morning we take a long hike up one of the hills behind town to the Villa Jovis, the Imperial palace that has been there since the time of Tiberius. He used to have his enemies thrown from the edge of the cliff there.

Of course we can't get very close to it, since it's still in use, occupied by members of the Imperial family whenever they visit Capreae. Nobody seems to be in residence right now but the gates are heavily guarded anyway. We can see it rising grandly from the summit of its hill, an enormous pile of gleaming masonry surrounded by elaborate fortifications.

"I wonder what it's like in there," I say. "But I'll never know, I guess."

"I've been inside it," Lucilla tells me.

"You have?"

"They claim that some of the rooms and furnishings go all the way back to Tiberius's reign. There's an indoor swimming pool with the most absolutely obscene mosaics all around it, and that's where he's supposed to have liked to diddle little boys and girls. But I think it's all mostly a fake put together in medieval times, or even later. The whole place was sacked, you know, when the Byzantines invaded the Western Empire six hundred years ago. It's pretty certain that they carried the treasures of the early Emperors off to Constantinopolis with them, wouldn't you think?"

"How did you happen to see it?" I ask. "You were traveling with your uncle, I suppose."

"With Flavius Rufus, actually."

"Flavius Rufus?"

"Flavius Caesar. Emperor Maxentius's third brother. He loves southern Italia. Comes down here all the time."

"With you?"

"Once in a while. Oh, silly, silly! I was *sixteen*. We were just friends!"

"And how old are you now?"

"Twenty-one," she says. Six years younger than I am, then.

"Very close friends, I suppose."

"Oh, don't be such a fool, Cymbelin!" There is laughter in her eyes. "You'll meet him too, when we're in Roma."

"A royal prince?"

"Of course! You'll meet *everyone*. The Emperor's brothers, the Emperor's sisters, the Emperor himself, if he's in town. I grew up at court, don't you realize that? In my uncle's household. My father died in the war."

"I'm sorry."

"Commanded the Augustus Legion, in Syria, Aiguptos, Palestina. Palestina's where he died. You've heard of the Siege of Aelia Capitolina? That's where he was killed, right outside the Temple of the Great Mother just as the city was falling to us. He was standing near some old ruined stone wall that's holy to the Jews and a sniper got him. Cassius Frontinus delivered the funeral oration himself. And afterward my uncle Gaius adopted me, because my mother was dead too, had killed herself the year before—that's a long story, a scandal at the court of the old Emperor—"

My head is swimming.

"Anyway, Flavius is like a brother to me. You'll see. We came down here and I stayed the night in the Villa Jovis. Saw all the naughty mosaics in Tiberius's swimming pool, swam in it, even—there was a gigantic feast afterward, wild boar from the mountains here, mountains of strawberries and bananas, and you wouldn't believe how much wine—oh, cheer up, Cymbelin, you didn't think I was a *virgin,* did you?"

"That isn't it. Not at all."

"Then what is it?"

"The thought that you really know the royals. That you're still so young and you've done so many astonishing things. And also that the man I was arguing with the other night was actually Cassius Lucius Frontinus the famous general, and that you're the niece of Gaius Junius Scaevola the Consul, and that you've been the mistress of the Emperor's brother, and—don't you see, Lucilla, how hard all this is for me? How bewildering?"

"My poor confused barbarian!"

"I wish you wouldn't call me that. Even if it's more or less true."

"My gorgeous Celt, then. My beautiful blond-haired Briton. That much is all right to say, isn't it?"

We hire one of the little one-horse carriages that are the only permissible vehicles on Capreae and ride down to the beach to spend the afternoon swimming naked in the warm sea and sunning ourselves on the rocky shore. Though it is late in the day and late also in the year, Lucilla's flawless skin quickly turns rosy, and she's hot and glowing when we return to our room.

Two days, two unforgettable nights, on Capreae. Then back to Surrentum, where our charioteer is dutifully waiting for us at the ferry landing, and up to Neapolis again, an all-day drive. I am reluctant to part from her at my hotel, urging her to spend the night with me there too, but she insists that she must get back to the villa of Frontinus.

"And I?" I say. "What do I do? I have to dine alone, I have to go to bed alone?"

She brushes her lips lightly across mine and laughs. "Did I say that? Of course you'll come with me to Frontinus's place! Of *course!*"

"But he hasn't invited me to return."

"What a fool you can be sometimes, Cymbelin. *I* invite you. I'm Adriana's guest. And you're mine. Go upstairs, pack up the rest of your things, tell the hotel you're checking out. Go on, now!"

And so it is. In Druso Tiberio's absurdly splendid quadriga we ride back up the hill to the villa of Marcellus Domitianus Frontinus, where I am greeted with apparently unfeigned warmth and no trace of surprise by our jolly host and given a magnificent suite of rooms overlooking the bay. Uncle Cassio is gone, and so are the other house guests who were there on the night of the party, and I am more than welcome.

My rooms just happen to adjoin those of Lucilla. That night, after a feast of exhausting excess at which Druso Tiberio and his gladiator playmate Ezio behave in a truly disgusting way while the elder Frontinus studiedly turns his attention elsewhere, I hear a gentle tapping at my door as I am preparing for bed.

"Yes?"

"It's me."

Lucilla. "Gods be thanked! Come in!"

She wears a silken robe so sheer she might as well have been naked. In one hand she carries a little candelabrum, in the other a flask of what appears to be wine. She is still tipsy from dinner, I see. I take the candelabrum from her before she sets herself afire, and then the flask.

"We could invite Adriana in too," she says coyly.

"Are you crazy?"

"No. Are you?"

"The two of you—?"

"We're best friends. We share everything."

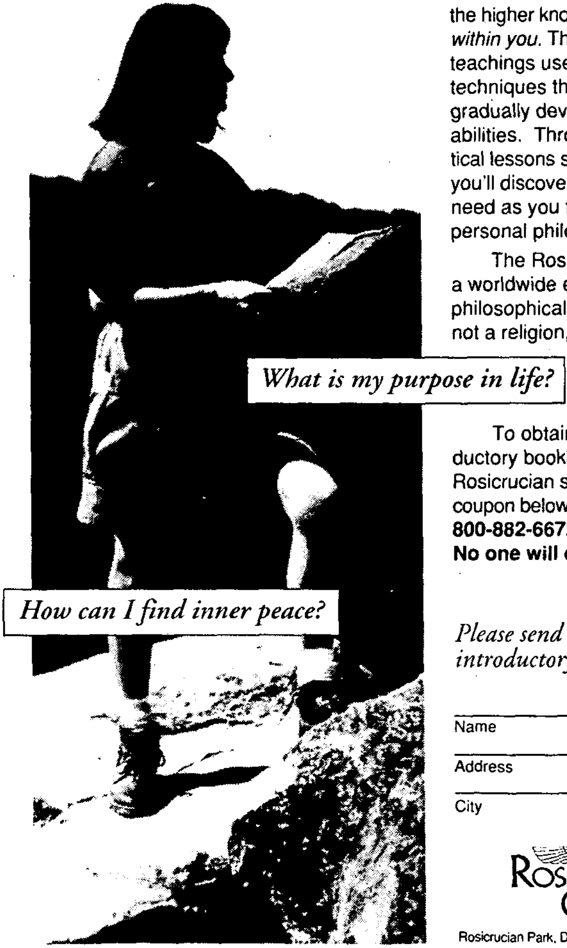
"No," I say. "Not this."

"You *are* provincial, Cymbelin."

"Yes, I am. And one woman at a time is quite enough for me."

She seems disappointed. I realize that she has promised to provide me to Adriana for tonight. Well, this is Imperial Italia, where the old traditions of unabashed debauchery evidently are very much alive. But though I speak of myself as Roman, I am not as Roman as all that, I suppose. Adriana Frontina is extraordinarily beautiful, yes, but so is Lucilla, and Lucilla is all I want just now, and that is that. Simple provincial tastes. No doubt I'll live to regret my decision; but this night I am unwavering in my mulish simplicity.

Lucilla, disappointed or not, proves passionate enough for two. The night passes in a sleepless haze. We go at each other wildly, feverishly.


What is my purpose in life?
How can I find inner peace?

The Answers to Life's Questions are Closer Than You Think

Learn how to draw upon the higher knowledge *already within you.* The Rosicrucian teachings use time-honored techniques that allow you to gradually develop your inner abilities. Through simple, practical lessons sent to your home, you'll discover the answers you need as you form your own personal philosophy of life.

The Rosicrucian Order is a worldwide educational and philosophical organization. It is not a religion, and does not require a specific code of belief or conduct.

To obtain the free introductory booklet about the Rosicrucian studies, send the coupon below or **call toll-free 800-882-6672.**
No one will call on you.

Please send me the free introductory booklet.

Name

Address

City State Zip

AMORC
ROSICRUCIAN ORDER

Rosicrucian Park, Dept. GSF, San Jose, CA 95191

She teaches me another new trick or two, and claps her hands at her own erotic cleverness. There are no women like this in Britannia: none that are known to me, at any rate.

At dawn we stand together on the balcony of my bedroom, weary with the best of all possible wearinesses, relishing the sweet cool breeze that rises from the bay.

"When do you want to go north?" she asks.

"Whenever you do."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Why not?"

"I warn you, you may be shocked by a few things you see going on in Urbs Roma."

"Then I'll be shocked, I suppose."

"You're very easily shocked, aren't you, Cymbelin?"

"Not really. Some of this is new to me, that's all."

Lucilla chuckles. "I'll educate you in our ways, never fear. It'll all get less frightening as you get used to it. You poor darling barbarian."

"You know I asked you not to—"

"You poor darling Celt, I mean," Lucilla says. "Come with me to Roma, love. But remember: when in Roma, it's best to do as the Romans do."

"I'll try," I promise.

Yet another chariot is put at our disposal for the journey: this one Ezio's, which he drove down in alone from Urbs Roma. He's going back north next week with Druso Tiberio, and they'll ride in one of his, but Ezio's chariot has to be returned to the Capital somehow, too. So we take it. It's not nearly as grand as the one Lucilla and I had just been using, but it's far more imposing than you would expect someone like Ezio to own. A gift from Druso Tiberio, no doubt.

The whole household turns out to see us off. Marcello Domiziano urges me to think of his villa as his home whenever I am in Neapolis. I invite him to be my father's guest in Britannia. Adriana gives Lucilla a more than friendly hug—I begin to wonder about them—and kisses me lightly on the cheek. But as I turn away from her I see a smoldering look in her eyes that seems compounded out of fury and regret. I suspect I have made an enemy here. But perhaps the damage can be repaired at a later time: it would be pleasant enough work to attempt it.

Our route north is the Via Roma, and we must descend into town to reach it. Since we have no driver, I will be the charioteer, and Lucilla sits beside me on the box. Our horses, a pair of slender, fiery Arabians, are well matched and need little guidance from me. The day is mild, balmy, soft breezes: yet another bright, sunny, summerlike day here in the eighth month of the year. I think of my homeland, how dark and wet it must be by now.

"Does winter ever reach Italia?" I ask. "Or have the Emperors made special arrangements with the gods?"

"Oh, it gets quite cold, quite wet," Lucilla assures me. "You'll see. Not so much down here, but in Roma itself, yes, the winters can be extremely vile. You'll still be here at the time of the Saturnalia, won't you?"

That's still two months away. "I hadn't really given it much thought. I suppose I will."

"Then you'll see how cold it can get. I usually go to someplace like Sicilia or Aiguptos for the winter months, but this year I'm going to stay in Roma." She snuggles cozily against me. "When the rains come we'll keep each other warm. Won't that be nice, Cymbelin?"

"Lovely. On the other hand, I wouldn't mind seeing Aiguptos, you know. We could take the trip together at the end of the year. The Pyramids, the great temples at Menfe—"

"I have to stay in Italia this winter. In or at least near Roma."

"You do? Why is that?"

"A family thing," she says. "It involves my uncle. But I mustn't talk about it."

I take the meaning of her words immediately.

"He's going to be named Consul again, isn't he? *Isn't* he?"

She stiffens and pulls her breath in quickly, and I know that I've hit on the truth.

"I mustn't say," she replies, after a moment.

"That's it, though. It has to be. The new year's Consuls take office on the first of January, and so of course you'll want to be there for the ceremony. What will this be, the fourth time for him? The fifth, maybe."

"Please, Cymbelin."

"Promise me this, at least. We'll stay around in Roma until he's sworn in, and then we'll go to Aiguptos. The middle of January, all right? I can see us now, heading up the Nile from Alexandria in a barge for two—"

"That's such a long time from now. I can't promise anything so far in advance." She puts her hand gently on my wrist and lets it linger there. "But we'll have as much fun as we can, won't we, even if it's cold and rainy, love?"

I see that there's no point pressing the issue. Maybe her January is already arranged, and her plans don't include me: a trip to Africa with one of her Imperial friends, perhaps, young Flavius Caesar or some other member of the royal family. Irrational jealousy momentarily curdles my soul; and then I put all thought of January out of my mind. This is October, and the gloriously beautiful Lucilla Junia Scaevola will share my bed tonight and tomorrow night and so on and on at least until the Saturnalia, if I wish it, and I certainly do, and that should be all that matters to me right now.

We are passing the great hotels of the Via Roma. Their resplendent façades shine in the morning sun. And then we begin to climb up out of town again, into the suburban heights, a string of minor villas and here and there an isolated hill with some venerable estate of the Imperial family sprawling around its summit. After a time we go down the far side of the hills and enter the flat open country beyond, heading through the fertile plains of Campania Felix toward the capital city in the distant north.

We spend our first night in Capua, where Lucilla wants me to see the frescoes in the Mithraeum. I attempt to draw on my letter of credit to pay the hotel bill, but I discover that there will be no charge for our suite: the magic name of Scaevola has opened the way for us. The frescoes are very fine, the god slaying a white bull with a serpent under its feet, and there is a huge amphitheater here, too—the one where Spartacus spurred the revolt of the gladiators—but Lucilla tells me, as I gawk in provincial awe, that the one in Roma is far more impressive. Dinner is brought to us in our room, breast of pheasant and some thick, musky wine, and afterward we soak in the bath a long while and then indulge in the nightly scramble of the passions. I can easily endure this sort of life well through the end of the year and some distance beyond.

Then in the morning it is onward, northward and westward along the Via Roma, which now has become the Via Appia, the ancient military highway along which the Romans marched when they came to conquer their neighbors in southern Italia. This is sleepy agricultural country, broken here and there by the dark cyclopean ruins of dead cities that go back to pre-Roman times, and by hilltop towns of more recent date, though themselves a thousand years old or more. I feel the tremendous weight of history here.

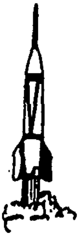
Lucilla chatters away the slow drowsy hours of our drive with talk of her innumerable patrician friends in the Capital, Claudio and Traiano and Alessandro and Marco Aureliano and Valeriano and a few dozen more, nearly all of them male, but there are a few female names among them, too, Domitilla, Severina, Giulia, Paolina, Tranquillina. High lords and ladies, I suppose. Sprinkled through the gossip are light-hearted references to members of the Imperial family who seem to be well known to her, close companions, in fact—not just the young Emperor, but his four brothers and three sisters, and assorted Imperial cousins and more distant kin.

I see more clearly than I have ever realized before how vast an establishment the family of our Caesars is, how many idle princes and princesses, each one with a great array of palaces, servitors, lovers and hangers-on. Nor is it only a single family, the cluster of royals who sit atop our world. For of course we have had innumerable dynasties occupying the throne during the nineteen centuries of the Empire, most of them long since extinct but many of the past five hundred years still surviving at least in some collateral line, completely unrelated to each other but all of them nevertheless carrying the great name of Caesar and all staking their claim to the public treasury. A dynasty can be overthrown but somehow the great-great-great-grand-nephews, or whatever, of someone whose brother was Emperor long ago can still manage, so it seems, to claim pensions from the public purse down through all the succeeding epochs of time.

It's clear from the way she talks that Lucilla has been the mistress

From our "Science Fiction" audio cassette series...

CLASSIC SCI-FI
• on •
RADIO!



☛ Did you ever wonder why the same Sci-Fi titles stay in the bookstores year after year? Why stories from the "Golden Age" are just as great today as they were then?

☛ Do you remember the "Golden Age Of Radio" when the only limit to the vistas on other planets was your own imagination?

☛ Both "Golden Ages" return with a special offer from Radio Yesteryear!

☛ Four hours of stories from "the far horizon of the unknown" with tales of new dimensions in time and space! On four audio cassettes.

ZERO HOUR by Ray Bradbury. When the kids start to play the game of "Invasion" watch out for the arrival of "Drill."
KNOCK by Fredric Brown. The last man on Earth sat alone in his room, and then there was a knock on the door.
■ **FT-03 Cassette**

THE COLD EQUATIONS by Tom Godwin. When a lady stows away aboard a space ship, reality and the law of physics must be faced.
MARS IS HEAVEN by Ray Bradbury. The first explorers from Earth find Mars all they could possiby hope it to be!
AN IMBALANCE OF SPECIES based on "A Gun For Dinosaur" by Ray Bradbury.
■ **FT-09 Cassette**

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS. One of the most famous radio dramas brought up to date. The Martians invade and destroy our civilization! With Dana Andrews, Pat Crowley and William Conrad. The CBS radio broadcast heard February 8, 1955. EXTRA: ORSON WELLES interviews H.G. WELLS.
■ **SF-03 Cassette**

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL. Klaatu comes to earth with a simple message of peace for mankind, or else! With Michael Rennie, Jean Peters, William Conrad. As heard on The Lux Rado Theatre, January 4th, 1954.
■ **SF-10 Cassette**

RADIO YESTERYEAR®
Box C, Sandy Hook, CT 06482 or call
1-800-243-0987

☐ **Zero Hour/Knock**
☐ **The Cold Equasion/Mars is Heaven An Imbalance Of Species**
☐ **The War Of The Worlds**
☐ **The Day The Earth Stood Still**

☐ Any Tape $4.98
☐ Any 2 Tapes $4.50 each
☐ Any 3 Tapes $4.25 each
☐ Any 4 Tapes $3.99 each

Please add $3.00 shipping and handling, plus applicable sales tax.

Total enclosed $____________

Name____________

Address____________

City____________

State/Zip____________

____
Credit Card Number

____
Signature

____
Expiration Date

© 1993 Radio Yesteryear

Dept. 044AS

of Flavius Caesar and very likely also of his older brother, Camillus Caesar, who holds the title of Prince of Constantinopolis, though he lives in Roma; she speaks highly also of a certain Roman count who bears the grand name of Nero Romulus Claudius Palladius, and there is a special tone in her voice when she tells me of him that I know comes into women's voices when they are speaking of a man with whom they have made love.

Jealousy of men I have never even met surges within me. How can she have done so much already, she who is only twenty-one? I try to control my feelings. This is Roma; there is no morality here as I understand the word; I must strive to do as the Romans do, indeed.

Despite myself I try to ask her about this Nero Romulus Claudius Palladius, but already she has moved along to a sister of the Emperor whom she's sure I'll adore. Severina Floriana is her name. "We went to school together. Next to Adriana, she's my best friend in the world. She's absolutely beautiful—dark, sultry, almost Oriental-looking. You'd think she was an Arab. And you'd be right, because her grandmother on her mother's side came from Syria. A dancing-girl, once upon a time, so the story goes—"

And on and on. I wonder if I am to be offered to Severina Floriana also.

It is the third day of our journey now. As the Via Appia nears the Capital we begin to encounter the Imperial tombs, lining the road on both sides. Lucilla seems to know them all, and calls them off for me.

"There's the tomb of Flavius Romulus, the big one on the left—and that one is Claudius IX—and Gaius Martius, there—that's Cecilia Metella, she lived in the time of Augustus—Titus Gallius—Constantinus V—Lucius and Arcadius Agrippa, both of them—Heraclius III—Gaius Paulus—Marcus Anastasius—"

The weight of antiquity presses ever more heavily on me.

"What about the earliest ones?" I ask. "Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius—"

"You'll see the Tomb of Augustus in the city. Tiberius? Nobody seems to remember where he was buried. There are a lot of them in Hadrianus' tomb overlooking the river, maybe ten of them, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, a whole crowd of dead Emperors in there. And Julius Caesar himself—there's a great tomb for him right in the middle of the Forum, but the archaeologists say it isn't really his, it was built six hundred years later—oh, look, Cymbelin—do you see, there? The walls of the city right ahead of us! Roma! Roma!"

And so it is, Urbs Roma, the great mother of cities, the capital of the world, the Imperial metropolis: its white marble-sheathed walls, built and rebuilt so many times, rise suddenly before me. Roma! The boy from the far country, humbled by the grandeur of it all, is shaken to the core. A shiver of awe goes through me so convulsively that it is transmitted through the reins to the horses, one of which glances back at me in what I imagine to be contempt and puzzlement.

Roma the city is like a palimpsest, a scroll that has been written on and cleaned and written on again, and again and again: and all the old texts show through amidst the newest one. Two thousand years of history assail the newcomer's bedazzled eye in a single glance. Nothing ever gets torn down here, except occasionally for the sake of building something even more grand on its site. Here and there can still be seen the last quaint occasional remnants of the Roma of the Republic—the First Republic, I suppose I should say now—with the marble Roma of Augustus Caesar right atop them, and then the Romas of all the later Caesars, Hadrianus's Roma and Septimius Severus's Roma and the Roma of Flavius Romulus, who lived and ruled a thousand years after Severus, and the one that the renowned world-spanning Emperor Trajan VII erected upon all the rest in the great years that followed Flavius's reuniting of the Eastern and Western Empires. All these are mixed together in the historic center of the city, and then too in a frightful ring surrounding them rise the massive hideous towers of modern times, the dreary office buildings and apartment houses of the Roma of today.

But even they, ugly as they are, are ugly in an awesomely grand Roman way. Roma is nothing if not grand: it excels at everything, even at ugliness.

Lucilla guides me in, calling off the world-famous sights as we pass them one by one: the baths of Caracalla, the Circus Maximus, the Temple of the Divine Claudius, the Tower of Aemilius Magnus, even the ponderous and malproportioned Arch of Triumph that the Byzantine Emperor erected in the year 1952 to mark the short-lived Greek victory in the Civil War, and which the Romans have allowed to remain as an all too visible reminder of the one great defeat in their history. But just at the opposite end of the avenue from it is the Arch of Flavius Romulus, too, five times the size of the Arch of Andronicus, to signify the final defeat of the Greeks after their two centuries of Imperial dominion.

The traffic is stupefying and chaotic. Chariots everywhere, horse-drawn trams, bicycles, and something that Lucilla says is very new, little steam-driven trains that run freely on wheels instead of tracks. There seem to be no rules: each vehicle goes wherever it pleases, nobody giving any signals, each driver attempting to intimidate those about him with gestures and curses. At first I have trouble with this, not because I am easily intimidated but because we Britons are taught early to be courteous to one another on the highways; but quickly I see that I have no choice but to behave as they do. *When in Roma,* et cetera—the old maxim applies to every aspect of life in the Capital.

"Left here. Now right. You see the Colosseum, over there? Bigger than you thought, isn't it? Turn right, turn right! That's the Forum down there, and the Capitol up on that hill. But we want to go the other way, over to the Palatine—it's the hill up there, you see? The one covered with palaces."

Yes. Enormous Imperial dwellings, two score or even more of them, all higgledy-piggledy, cheek by jowl. Whole mountains of marble must have been leveled to build that incomprehensible maze of splendor.

And we are heading right into the midst of it all. The entrance to the Palatine is well patrolled, hordes of Praetorians everywhere, but they all seem to know Lucilla by sight and they wave us on in. She tries to explain to me which palace is whose, but it's all a hopeless jumble, and even she isn't really sure. Underneath what we see, she says, are the original palaces of the early Imperial days, those of Augustus and Tiberius and the Flavians, but of course nearly every Emperor since then has wanted to add his own embellishments and enhancements, and by now the whole hill is a crazy quilt of Imperial magnificence and grandiosity in twenty different styles, including a few very odd Oriental and pseudo-Byzantine structures inserted into the mix in the twenty-fourth century by some of the weirder monarchs of the Decadence. Towers and arcades and pavilions and gazebos and colonnades and domes and basilicas and fountains and peculiar swooping vaults jut out everywhere.

"And the Emperor himself?" I ask her. "Where in all that does he live?"

She waves her hand vaguely toward the middle of the heap. "Oh, he moves around, you know. He never stays in the same place two nights in a row."

"Why is that? Is he the restless type?"

"Not at all. But Actinius Varro makes him do it."

"Who?"

"Varro. The Praetorian Prefect. He worries a lot about assassination plots."

I laugh. "When an Emperor is assassinated, isn't it usually his own Praetorian Prefect who does it?"

"Usually, yes. But the Emperor always thinks that *his* prefect is the first completely loyal one, right up till the moment the knife goes into his belly. Not that anyone would want to assassinate a foolish fop like our Maxentius," she adds.

"If he's as incompetent as everyone says, wouldn't that be a good reason for removing him, then?"

"What, and make one of his even more useless brothers Emperor in his place? Oh, no, Cymbelin. I know them all, believe me, and Maxentius is the best of the lot. Long life to him, I say."

"Indeed. Long life to Emperor Maxentius," I chime in, and we both enjoy a good laugh.

The particular palace we are heading for is one of the newest on the hill: an ornate, many-winged guest pavilion, much bedizened with eye-dazzling mosaics, brilliant wild splotches of garish yellows and uninhibited scarlets. It had been erected just sixty years before, she tells me, in the reign of the lunatic Emperor Demetrius, the last Caesar of the Decadence. Lucilla has a little apartment in it, courtesy of her good

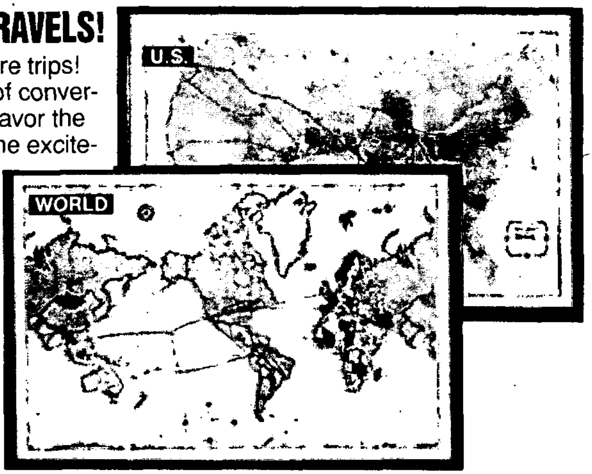


CHART YOUR TRAVELS!

Record past & future trips! Stimulate a world of conversational interest. Savor the memories. Enjoy the excitement of planning your travels! Excellent for reference and charting business territories.

All maps are in full color, framed and come with charting kit including map pins, charting ruler and marking pen.

THREE SIZES AVAILABLE

STANDARD 30" x 20" printed on heavy artcraft stock. Framed in rich walnut finish wood. Ready to hang. World or U.S. **$38.00** **(2 or more $35.00 each)**

DELUXE 33" x 22" map laminated with thick 10-mil Poly-Mylar™ film. Surface can be wiped clean. Framed in rich walnut finish wood. Ready to hang. World or U.S. **$49.50** **(2 or more $45.00 each)**

KINGSIZE 52" x 34" map laminated with thick 10-mil Poly-Mylar™ film. Surface can be wiped clean. Framed in gold anodized aluminum. Easy to assemble. World or U.S. **$99.50** **(2 or more $95.00 each)**

PERSONALIZED: Name hand lettered add $5 ea.
ADD $5 FOR SHIPPING & HANDLING

VISA, M/C phone orders
1-800-322-1866
In California (213) 965-9380

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

THE CHART HOUSE TRAVEL MAP CO., INC.
5222 Venice Blvd., L.A., CA 90019 Dept. 044AS

☐ Standard ☐ Deluxe ☐ Kingsize
☐ World ☐ U.S. ☐ World ☐ U.S. ☐ World ☐ U.S.

Send __________ maps $ __________ Total.

☐ VISA ☐ MASTERCARD ☐ Check enclosed

Card # ____________________ Exp. __________

Name ______________________________

Address ______________________________

City, State, Zip ______________________________

friend, Prince Flavius Rufus. Apparently a good many non-royal members of the Imperial Roman social set live up here on the Palatine. It's more convenient for everyone that way, traffic being what it is in Roma and the number of parties being so great.

The beginning of my stay in the Capital is Neapolis all over again: there is a glittering social function for me to attend on my very first night. The host, says Lucilla, is none other than the famous Count Nero Romulus Claudius Palladius, who is terribly eager to meet me.

"And who is he, exactly?" I ask.

"His grandfather's brother was Count Valerian Apollinaris. You know who he was?"

"Of course." One doesn't need a Cantabrigian education to recognize the name of the architect of the modern Empire, the great five-term Consul of the First War of Reunification. It was Valerian Apollinaris who had dragged the frayed and crumbling Empire out of the sorry era known as the Decadence, put an end to the insurrections in the provinces that had wracked the Empire throughout the troubled twenty-fourth century, restored the authority of the central government, and installed Laureolus Caesar, grandfather of our present Emperor, on the throne. It was Apollinaris who—acting in Laureolus' name, as an unofficial Caesar standing behind the true one—had instituted the Reign of Terror, that time of brutal discipline which had, for better or for worse, brought the Empire back to some semblance of the greatness that it last had known in the time of Flavius Romulus and the seventh Trajan. And then perished in the Terror himself, along with so many others.

I know nothing of this grand-nephew of his, this Nero Romulus Claudius Palladius, except what I've heard of him from Lucilla. But she conveys merely by the way she utters his name, his full name every time, that he has followed in his ancestor's path, that he too is a man of great power in the realm.

And indeed it is obvious to me right away, when Lucilla and I arrive at Count Nero Romulus's Palatine Hill palace, that my guess is correct.

The palace itself is relatively modest: a charming little building on the lower slope of the hill, close to the Forum, that I am told dates from the Renaissance and was originally built for one of the mistresses of Trajan VII. Just as Count Nero Romulus has never bothered to hold the Consulate or any of the other high offices of the realm, Count Nero Romulus doesn't need a grand edifice to announce his importance. But the guest list at his party says it all.

The current Consul, Aulus Galerius Bassianus, is there. So are two of the Emperor's brothers, and one of his sisters. And also Lucilla's uncle, the distinguished and celebrated Gaius Junius Scaevola, four times Consul of Roma and by general report the most powerful man in the Empire next to Emperor Maxentius himself—*more* powerful than the Emperor, many believe.

Lucilla introduces me to Scaevola first. "My friend Cymbelin Vetruvius Scapulanus from Britannia," she says, with a grand flourish. "We met at Marcello Domiziano's house in Neapolis, and we've been inseparable ever since. Isn't he splendid, Uncle Gaius?"

What does one say, when one is a huge hulking provincial on his first night in the Capital and one finds oneself thrust suddenly into the presence of the greatest citizen of the realm?

But I manage not to stammer and blurt and lurch. With reasonable smoothness, in fact, I say, "I could never have imagined, when I set out from Britannia to see the fatherland of the Empire, Consul Scaevola, that I would have the honor to encounter the father of the country himself!"

At which he smiles amiably and says, "I think you rank me too highly, my friend. It's the Emperor who's the father of the country, you know. As it says right here." And pulls a shiny new sestertius piece from his purse and holds it up so I can see the inscriptions around the edge, the cryptic string of abbreviated Imperial titles that all the coinage has carried since time immemorial. "You see?" he says, pointing to the letters on the rim of the coin just above the eyebrows of Caesar Maxentius. "P.P., standing for *'Pater Patriae.'* There it is. Him, not me. Father of the country." Then, with a wink to take the sting out of his rebuke, such as it had been, he says, "But I appreciate flattery as much as the next man, maybe even a little more. So thank you, young man. Lucilla's not being too much trouble for you, is she, now?"

I'm not sure what he means by that. Perhaps nothing.

"Hardly," I say.

I realize that I'm staring. Scaevola is a gaunt, wiry man of middle height as well, perhaps fifty years old, balding, with his remaining thin strands of hair—red hair, like Lucilla's—pulled taut across his scalp. His cheekbones are pronounced, his nose is sharp, his chin is strong; his eyes are a very pale, icy gray-blue, the blue of a milky-hued sapphire. He looks astonishingly like Julius Caesar, the famous portrait that is on the ten-denarius postage stamp: that same expression of utterly unstoppable determination that arises out of infinite resources of inner power.

He asks me a few questions about my travels and about my homeland, listens with apparent interest to my replies, wishes me well, and efficiently sends me on my way.

My knees are trembling. My throat is dry.

Now I must meet my host the Count, and he is no easy pudding either. Nero Romulus Claudius Palladius is every bit as imposing as I had come to expect, a suave, burnished-looking man of about forty, tall for a Roman and strongly built, with a dense, flawlessly trimmed black beard, skin of a rich deep tone, dark penetrating eyes. He radiates an aura of wealth, power, self-assurance, and—even I am capable of detecting it—an almost irresistible sensuality.

"Cymbelin," he says immediately. "A great name, a romantic name, the name of a king. Welcome to my house, Cymbelin of Britannia." His voice is resonant, a perfectly modulated basso, the voice of an actor, of an opera singer. "We hope to see you here often during your stay in Roma."

Lucilla, by my side, is staring at him in the most worshipful way. Which should trigger my jealousy; but I confess I feel such awe for him myself that I can scarcely object that she is under his spell.

He rests his hand lightly on my shoulder. "Come. You must meet some of my friends." And takes me around the room. Introduces me to the incumbent Consul, Galerius Bassanius, who is younger and more frivolously dressed than I would have thought a Consul would be, and to some actors who seem to expect that I would recognize their names, though I don't and have to dissemble a little, and to a gladiator whose name I do recognize—who wouldn't, considering that he is the celebrated Marcus Sempronius Diodorus, Marcus the Lion-Slayer?—and then to a few flashy young ladies, with whom I make the appropriate flirtatious banter even though Lucilla has more beauty in her left elbow alone than any one of them does in her entire body.

We pass now through an atrium where a juggler is performing and onward to a second room, just as crowded as the first, where the general conversation has an oddly high-pitched tone and people are standing about in strangely stilted postures. After a moment I understand why.

There are royals in here. Everyone is on best court behavior.

Two princes of the blood, no less. Lucilla has me meet them both.

The first is Camillus Caesar, the Prince of Constantinopolis, eldest of the Emperor's four brothers. He is plump, lazy-looking, with oily skin and an idle, slouching way of holding himself. If Gaius Scaevola is a Julius Caesar, this man is a Nero. But for all his soft fleshiness I can make out distinct traces of the familiar taut features that mark the royal family: the sharp, fragile, imperious nose, the heroic chin, above all the chilly eyes, blue as Arctic ice, half hidden though they are behind owlish spectacles. It is as if the stern face of old Emperor Laureolus has somehow become embedded in the meaty bulk of this wastrel grandchild of his.

Camillus is too drunk, even this early in the evening, to say very much to me. He gives me a sloppy wave of his chubby hand and loses interest in me immediately.

Onward we go to the next oldest of the royals, Flavius Rufus Caesar. I am braced to dislike him, aware as I am that he has had the privilege of being Lucilla's lover when she was only sixteen, but in truth he is charming, affable, a very seductive man. About twenty-five, I guess. He too has the family face; but he is lean, agile-looking, quick-eyed, probably quick-witted as well. Since from all I have heard his brother Maxentius is a buffoon and a profligate, it strikes me as a pity that the throne had not descended to Flavius Rufus instead of the other one when their old grandfather finally had shuffled off the scene. But the eldest heir succeeds: it is the ancient rule. With Prince Florus dead three years before his father Laureolus, the throne had gone to Florus's oldest son Maxentius, and the world might be very different today had not that happened. Or perhaps I am overestimating the younger prince. Had Lucilla not told me Maxentius was the best of the lot?

Flavius Rufus—who plainly knows that I am Lucilla's current amusement, and who just as plainly isn't bothered by that—urges me to visit him toward the end of the year at the great Imperial villa at Tibur, a day's journey outside Roma, where he will be celebrating the Saturnalia with a few hundred of his intimate friends.

"Oh, and bring the redhead, too," Flavius Rufus says cheerfully. "You won't forget her, now, will you?"

He blows her a kiss, and gives me a friendly slap on the palm of my hand, and returns to the adulation of his entourage. I am pleased and relieved that our meeting went so well.

Lucilla has saved the best of the family for last, though.

The dearest friend of her childhood, her schoolmate, her honorary kinswoman: the Princess Severina Floriana, sister of the Emperor. Before whom I instantly want to throw myself in utter devotion, she is so overpoweringly beautiful.

As Lucilla had said, Severina Floriana is dark, torrid-looking, exotic. There is no trace of the family features about her—her eyes are glossy black, her nose is a wanton snub, her chin is elegantly rounded—and I know at once that she must not be full sister to the Emperor, that she has to be the child of some subsidiary wife of Maxentius's father: royals may have but one wife at a time, like the rest of us, but it is well known that often they exchange one wife for another, and sometimes take the first one back later on, and who is to say them nay? If Severina's mother looked anything like Severina, I can see why the late Prince Florus was tempted to dally with her.

I was glib enough when speaking with Gaius Scaevola and Nero Romulus Claudius Palladius, but I am utterly tongue-tied before Severina Floriana. Lucilla and she do all the talking, and I stand to one side, looming awkwardly in silence like an ox that Lucilla has somehow happened to bring to the party. They chatter of Neapolis's social set, of Adriana, of Druso Tiberio, of a host of people whose names mean nothing to me; they speak of me, too, but what they are talking is the rapid-fire Roman of the Capital, so full of slang and unfamiliar pronunciations that I can scarcely understand a thing. Now and again Severina Floriana directs her gaze at me—maybe appraisingly, maybe just out of curiosity at Lucilla's newest acquisition; I can't tell which. I try to signal her with my eyes that I would like a chance to get to know her better, but the situation is so complex and I know I am being reckless—how dare I even *think* of a romance with a royal princess, and how rash, besides, to invite the rage of Lucilla Scaevola by making overtures to her own friend right under her nose—!

In any case I get no acknowledgment from Severina of any of my bold glances.

Lucilla marches me away, eventually. We return to the other room. I am numb.

"I can see that you're fascinated with her," Lucilla tells me. "Isn't that so?"

I make some stammering reply.

"Oh, you can fall in love with her if you like," Lucilla says airily. "I won't mind, silly! Everyone falls in love with her, anyway, so why shouldn't you? She's amazingly gorgeous, I know. I'd take her to bed myself, if that sort of thing interested me a little more."

"Lucilla—I—"

"This is *Roma,* Cymbelin! Stop acting like such a simpleton!"

"I'm here with you. You are the woman I'm here with. I'm absolutely crazy about you."

"Of course you are. And now you're going to be obsessed with Severina Floriana for a while. It's not in the least surprising. Not that you made much of a first impression on her, I suspect, standing there and gawking like that without saying a word, although she doesn't always ask that a man have a mind, if he's got a nice enough body. But I think she's interested. You'll get your chance during Saturnalia, I promise you that." And she gives me a look of such joyous wickedness that I feel my brain reeling at the shamelessness of it all.

Roma! Roma! There is no place on Earth like it.

Silently I vow that one day soon I will hold Severina Floriana in my arms. But it is a vow that I was not destined to be able to keep; and now that she is dead I think of her often, with the greatest sadness, recreating her exotic beauty in my mind and imagining myself caressing her the way I might dream of visiting the palace of the Queen of the Moon.

Lucilla gives me a little push toward the middle of the party and I stagger away on my own, wandering from group to group, pretending to a confidence and a sophistication which at this moment is certainly not mine.

There is Nero Romulus in the corner, quietly talking with Gaius Junius Scaevola. The true monarchs of Roma, they are, the men who hold the real Imperial power. But in what way it is divided between them, I can't even begin to guess.

The Consul, Bassanius, smirking and primping between two male actors who wear heavy makeup. What is he trying to do, re-enact the ancient days of Nero and Caligula?

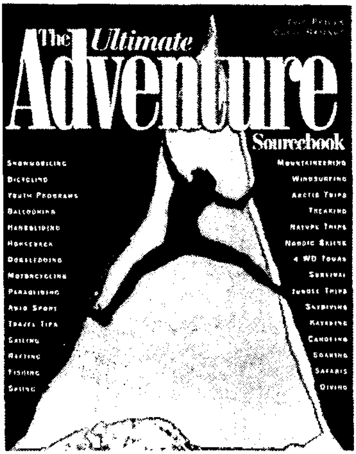
The gladiator, Diodorus, fondling three or four girls at once.

A man I haven't noticed before, sixty or even seventy years old, with a face like a hatchetblade and skin the color of fine walnut, holding court near the fountain. His clothing, his jewelry, his bearing, his flashing eyes, all proclaim him to be a man of substance and power. "Who's that?" I ask a passing young man, and get a look of withering scorn. He tells me, in tones that express his wonder at my ignorance, that that is Leontes Atticus, a name that means nothing to me, so that I have to ask a second question, and my informant lets me know, even more contemptuously, that Leontes Atticus is merely the wealthiest man in the Empire. This fierce-eyed parched-looking Greek, I learn, is a shipping magnate who controls more than half the ocean trade with Nova Roma: he

the HEART of HEALING
NOETIC SCIENCES with WILLIAM POOLE

WONDERFUL GIFTS

THE HEART OF HEALING
From the beginning of time, man's preoccupation with healing the body has been an almost religious pursuit. *The Heart of Healing*, by The Noetic Sciences Institute with William Poole, is an amazing documentation of the mind connection in the healing of the human body. See how fascinating reports of unconventional methods of treatment are repeatedly challenging some of our most deeply held beliefs about traditional medicine. This hardcover edition, with over 150 photographs in addition to illustrations and graphics, has 225 pages that focus on people across the world and explore how belief systems are at the heart of healing.



THE ULTIMATE ADVENTURE SOURCEBOOK
Looking for exotic destinations? Daring adventures? Unique excursions? Here is the most action-packed vacation guide for adventurers and travelers alike. This unique reference book covers everything from motorcycling and sailing to skydiving and safaris. The softcover volume includes detailed descriptions of both domestic and international adventures with prices and itineraries. With 432 information-packed pages and over 400 full-color photographs, *The Ultimate Adventure Sourcebook* is *the* complete resource for adventure, sports and travel.

Please send me: ____ copies of *The Heart of Healing* @ **$24.95** each.
____ copies of *The Ultimate Adventure Sourcebook* @ **$29.95** each.
Please add $2.00 per book for shipping & handling. NYS residents add 8.25% sales tax.
Please make check or money order payable to **Turner Publishing, Inc.**
Send to: **Turner Publishing, Inc., 420 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10018**

044AS

Name

Address Phone

City State Zip

takes his fat percentage on most of the rich cargo that comes to us from the savage and strange New World far across the sea.

And so on and on, new guests arriving all the time, a glowing assembly of the great ones of the Capital crowding into the room, everyone who is powerful or wealthy or young, or if possible all three at once.

There is fire smoldering in this room tonight. Soon it will burst forth. But who could have known that then? Not I, not I, certainly not I.

Lucilla spends what seems like an hour conversing with Count Nero Romulus, to my great discomfort. There is an easy intimacy about the way they speak to each other that tells me things I'm not eager to know. What I fear is that he is inviting her to spend the night here with him after the party is over. But I am wrong about that. Ultimately Lucilla returns to my side, and doesn't leave it for the rest of the evening.

We dine on fragrant delicacies unknown to me. We drink wines of startling hues and strange piquant flavors. There is dancing; there is a theatrical performance by mimes and jugglers and contortionists; some of the younger guests strip unabashedly naked and splash giddily in the palace pool. I see couples stealing away into the garden and some who sink into embraces in full view.

"Come," Lucilla says finally. "I'm becoming bored with this. Let's go home and amuse each other in privacy, Cymbelin."

It's nearly dawn by the time we reach her apartments. We make love until midday, and sink then into a deep sleep that holds us in its grip far into the hours of the afternoon, and beyond them, so that it is dark when we arise.

So it goes for me, then, week after week, autumn in Roma, the season of pleasure. Lucilla and I go everywhere together: the theater, the opera, the gladiatorial contests. We are greeted with deference at the finest restaurants and shown to the best tables. She takes me on a tour of the monuments of the Capital—the Senate house, the famous temples, the ancient Imperial tombs. It is a dizzying time for me, a season beyond my wildest fantasies.

Occasionally I catch a glimpse of Severina Floriana at some restaurant, or encounter her at a party. Lucilla goes out of her way to give us a chance to speak to each other, and on a couple of these occasions Severina and I do have conversations that seem to be leading somewhere: she is curious about my life in Britannia, she wants to know my opinion of Roma, she tells me little gossipy tidbits about people on the other side of the room.

Her dark beauty astounds me. We fair-haired Britons rarely see women of her sort. She is a creature from another world, blue high-lights in her jet-black hair, eyes like mysterious pools of night, skin of a rich deep hue utterly unlike that of my people, not simply the olive tone that so many citizens of the eastern Roman world have, but something darker, more opulent, with a satiny sheen and texture. Her voice, too, is enchanting, husky without a trace of hoarseness, a low, soft, fluting sound, musical and magnificently controlled.

She knows I desire her. But she playfully keeps our encounters beyond the zone where any such thing can be communicated, short of simply blurting it out. Somehow I grow confident, though, that we will be lovers sooner or later. Which perhaps would have been the case, had there only been time.

On two occasions I see her brother the Emperor, too.

Once is at the opera, in his box: he is formally attired in the traditional Imperial costume, the purple toga, and he acknowledges the salute of the audience with a negligent wave and a smile. Then, a week or two later, he passes through one of the Palatine Hill parties, in casual modern dress this time, with a simple purple stripe across his vest to indicate his high status.

At close range I am able to understand why people speak so slightingly of him. Though he has the Imperial bearing and the Imperial features, the commanding eyes and the nose and the chin and all that, there is something about the eager, uncertain smile of Caesar Maxentius that negates all his Imperial pretensions. He may call himself Caesar, he may call himself Augustus, and Pater Patriae and Pontifex Maximus and all the rest; but when you look at him, I discover to my surprise and dismay, he simpers and fails to return your gaze in any steady way. He should never have been given the throne. His brother Flavius Rufus would have been ever so much more regal.

Still, I have met the Emperor, such as he is. It is not every Briton who can say that; and the number of those who can will grow ever fewer from now on.

I send a message home by wire, every once in a while. *Having incredibly good time, could stay here forever but probably won't.* I offer no details. One can hardly say in a telegram that one is living in a little palace a stone's throw from the Emperor's official residence, and sleeping with the niece of Gaius Junius Scaevola, and attending parties with people whose names are known throughout the Empire, and hobnobbing with His Imperial Majesty himself once in a while, to boot.

The year is nearing its end, now. The weather has changed, just as Lucilla said it would: the days are darker and of course shorter, the air is cool, rain is frequent. I haven't brought much of a winter wardrobe with me, and Lucilla's younger brother, a handsome fellow named Aquila, takes me to his tailor to get me outfitted for the new season. The latest Roman fashions seem strange, even uncouth, to me: but what do I know of Roman fashion? I take Aquila's praise of my new clothes at face value, and the tailor's and Lucilla's also, and hope they're not all simply having sport with me.

The invitation that Flavius Rufus Caesar extended to Lucilla and me that first night—to spend the Saturnalia at the Imperial villa at Tibur—was, I discover, a genuine one. By the time December arrives I have forgotten all about it; but Lucilla hasn't, and she tells me, one evening, that we are to leave for Praeneste in the morning. That is a place not far from Roma, where in ancient and medieval times an oracle held forth in the Cave of Destiny until Trajan VII put an end to her privileges. We will stay there for a week or so at the estate of a vastly rich Hispanic merchant named Scipio Lucullo, and then go onward to nearby Tibur for the week of the Saturnalia itself.

Scipio Lucullo's country estate, even in these bleak days of early winter, is grand beyond my comprehension. The marble halls, the pools and fountains, the delicate outer pavilions, the animal chambers where lions and zebras and giraffes are kept, the collections of statuary and paintings and objects of art, the baths, everything is on an Imperial scale. But there is no Imperial heritage here. Lucullo's place was built, someone tells me, only five years ago, out of the profits of his gold mines in Nova Roma, ownership of which he attained by scandalous bribery of court officials during the disastrous final days of the reign of old Caesar Laureolus. His own guests, though they don't disdain his immense hospitality, regard his estate as tawdry and vulgar, I discover.

"I'd be happy to live in such tawdriness," I tell Lucilla. "Is that a terribly provincial thing to say?"

But she only laughs. "Wait until you see Tibur," she says.

And indeed I discover the difference between mere showiness and true magnificence when we move along to the famous Imperial villa just as the Saturnalia week is about to begin.

This is, of course, the place that the great Hadrianus built for his country pleasures seventeen centuries ago. In his own time it was, no doubt, a wonder of the world, with its porticos and fountains and reflecting pools, its baths both great and small, its libraries both Greek and Roman, its nymphaeum and triclinium, its temples to all the gods under whose spell Hadrianus fell as he traveled the length and breadth of the Roman world.

But that was seventeen centuries ago; and seventeen centuries of Emperors have added to this place, so that the original villa of Hadrianus, for all its splendor, is only a mere part of the whole, and the totality must surely be the greatest palace in the world, a residence worthy of Jupiter or Apollo. "You can ride all day and not see the whole thing," Lucilla says to me. "They don't keep it all open at once, of course. We'll be staying in the oldest wing, what they still call Hadrianus' Villa. But all around us you'll see the parts that Trajan VII added, and Flavius Romulus, and the Khitai Pavilions that Lucius Agrippa built for the little yellow-skinned concubine that he brought back from Asia Ultima. And if there's time—oh, but there won't be time, will there—?"

"Why not?" I ask.

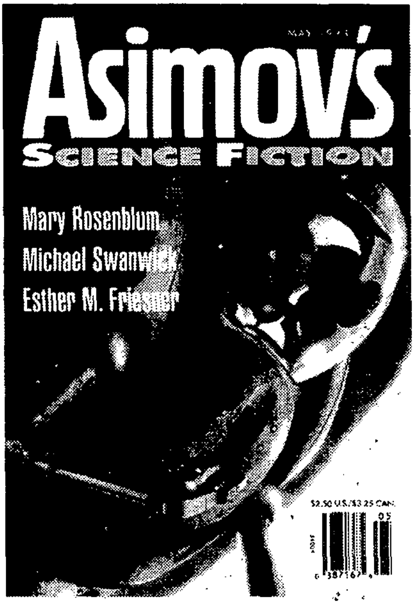
She evades my glance. It is my first clue to what is to come.

All day long the great ones of Roma arrive at the Imperial villa for Flavius Rufus's Saturnalia festival. By now I don't need to have their names whispered to me. I recognize Atticus the shipping tycoon, and Count Nero Romulus, and Marco Tullio Garofalo, who is the president of the Bank of the Imperium, and Diodorus the gladiator, and the Consul

ENTER ANOTHER DIMENSION

Explore worlds of imagination with stories by Roger Zelazny, Robert Silverberg and Connie Willis.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND SAVE OVER 34%.


Asimov's
SCIENCE FICTION
Mary Rosenblum
Michael Swanwick
Esther M. Friesner
$2.50 U.S./$3.25 CAN.

☐ Please send me 18 issues of ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION for only $30.97—I save over 34% off the newsstand price.

☐ Please send me 12 issues of ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION for $22.97.
☐ Payment enclosed ☐ Bill me

MAIL TO
ASIMOV'S
P.O. Box 5130
HARLAN, IA 51593

OR CALL
1-800-333-4108

NAME ______________________
ADDRESS ______________________
CITY ______________________
STATE ____________ ZIP ________

Outside U.S. & Possessions, 12 for $27.97, 18 for $39.97 (Payment with order, U.S. funds). Please allow 6–8 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Includes GST.

We publish two double issues, in April and November. Each double issue counts as two towards your subscription.

HASC-2

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bassanius, and pudgy, petulant Prince Camillus, and dozens more. Carriages are lined up along the highway, waiting to disgorge their glittering passengers.

One who does not arrive is Gaius Junius Scaevola. It's unthinkable that he hasn't been invited; I conclude therefore that my guess about his being named Consul once more for the coming year is correct, and that he has remained in Roma to prepare for taking office. I ask Lucilla if that's indeed why her uncle isn't here, and she says, simply, "The holiday season is always a busy time for him. He wasn't able to get away."

He *is* going to be Consul once again! I'm sure of it.

But I'm wrong. The day after our arrival I glance at the morning newspaper, and there are the names of the Consuls for the coming year. His Imperial Majesty has been pleased to designate Publius Lucius Gallienus and Gaius Acecius Aufidius as Consuls of the Realm. They will be sworn into office at noon on the first of January, weather permitting, on the steps of the Capitol building.

Not Scaevola, then. It must be important business of some other kind, then, that keeps him from leaving Roma in the closing days of the year.

And who are these Consuls, Gallienus and Aufidius? For both, it will be their first term in that highest of governmental offices next to that of the Emperor.

"Boyhood friends of Maxentius," someone tells me, with a dismissive sniff. "Schoolmates of his."

And someone else says, "Not only don't we have a real Emperor any more, we aren't even going to have Consuls now. Just a bunch of lazy children pretending to run the government."

That seems very close to treasonous, to me—especially considering that this very villa is an Imperial palace, and we are all here as guests of the Emperor's brother. But these patricians, I have been noticing, are extraordinarily free in their criticisms of the royal family, even while accepting their hospitality.

Which is abundant. There is feasting and theatricals every night, and during the day we are free to avail ourselves of the extensive facilities of the villa, the heated pools, the baths, the libraries, the gambling pavilions, the riding paths. I float dreamily through it all as though I have stumbled into a fairy-tale world, which is indeed precisely what it is.

At the party the third night I finally find the courage to make a mild approach to Severina Floriana. Lucilla has said that she would like to spend the next day resting, since some of the biggest events of the week still lie ahead; and so I invite Severina Floriana to go riding with me after breakfast tomorrow. Once the two of us are alone, off in some remote corner of the property, perhaps I will dare to suggest some more intimate kind of encounter. Perhaps. What I am attempting to arrange, after all, is a dalliance with the Emperor's sister. Which is such an extraordinary idea that I can scarcely believe I am engaged in such a thing.

She looks amused and, I think, tempted by the suggestion.

But then she tells me that she won't be here tomorrow. Something has come up, she says, something trifling but nevertheless requiring her immediate attention, and she must return briefly to Urbs Roma in the morning.

"You'll be coming back here, won't you?" I ask anxiously.

"Oh, yes, of course. I'll be gone a day or two at most. I'll be here for the big party the final night, you can be sure of that!" She gives me a quick impish glance, as though to promise me some special delight for that evening, by way of consolation for this refusal now. And reaches out to touch my hand a moment. A spark as though of electricity passes from her to me. It is all that ever will; I have never forgotten it.

Lucilla remains in our suite the next day, leaving me to roam the villa's grounds alone. I lounge in the baths, I swim, I inspect the galleries of paintings and sculpture, I drift into the gambling pavilion and lose a few solidi at cards to a couple of languid lordlings.

I notice an odd thing that day. I see none of the people I had previously met at the parties of the Palatine Hill set in Roma. Count Nero Romulus, Leontes Atticus, Prince Flavius Rufus, Prince Camillus, Bassanius, Diodorus—not one of them seems to be around. The place is full of strangers today.

And without Lucilla by my side as I make my increasingly uneasy way among these unknowns, I feel even more of an outsider here than I really am: since I wear no badge proclaiming me to be the guest of Gaius Scaevola's niece, I become in her absence merely a barely civilized outlander who has somehow wangled his way into the villa and is trying with only fair success to pretend to be a well-bred Roman. I imagine that they are laughing at me behind my back, mocking my style of dress, imitating my British accent.

Nor is Lucilla much comfort when I return to our rooms. She is distant, abstracted, moody. She asks me only the most perfunctory questions about how I have spent my day, and then sinks back into lethargy and brooding.

"Are you not feeling well?" I ask her.

"It's nothing serious, Cymbelin."

"Have *I* done something to annoy you?"

"Not at all. It's just a passing thing," she says. "These dark winter days—"

But today hasn't been dark at all. Cool, yes, but the sun has been a thing of glory all day, illuminating the December sky with a bright radiance that makes my British heart ache. Nor is it the bad time of month for her; so I am mystified by Lucilla's gloomy remoteness. I can see that no probing of mine will produce a useful answer, though. I'll just have to wait for her mood to change.

At the party that night she is no more ebullient than before. She floats about like a wraith, indifferently greeting people who seem scarcely more familiar to her than they are to me.

"I wonder where everyone is," I say. "Severina told me she had to go back to Roma to take care of something today. But where's Prince Camillus? Count Nero Romulus? Have they gone back to Roma too? And Prince Flavius Rufus—he doesn't seem to be at his own party."

Lucilla shrugs. "Oh, they must be here and there, somewhere around. Take me back to the room, will you, Cymbelin? I'm not feeling at all partyish, tonight. There's a good fellow. I'm sorry to be spoiling the fun like this."

"Won't you tell me what's wrong, Lucilla?"

"Nothing. *Nothing*. I just feel—I don't know, a little tired. Low-spirited, maybe. Please. I want to go back to the room."

She undresses and gets into bed. Facing that party full of strangers without her is too daunting for me, and so I get into bed beside her. I realize, after a moment, that she's quietly sobbing.

"Hold me, Cymbelin," she murmurs.

I take her into my arms. Her closeness, her nakedness, arouses me as always, and I tentatively begin to make love to her, but she asks me to stop. So we lie there, trying to fall asleep at this strangely early hour, while distant sounds of laughter and music drift toward us through the frosty night air.

The next day things are worse. She doesn't want to leave our suite at all. But she tells me to go out without her: makes it quite clear, in fact, that she wants to be alone.

What a strange Saturnalia week this is turning into! How little jollity there is, how much unexplained tension!

But explanations will be coming, soon enough.

At midday, after a dispiriting stroll through the grounds, I return to the room to see whether Lucilla has taken a turn for the better.

Lucilla is gone.

There's no trace of her. Her closets are empty. She has packed and vanished, without a word to me, without any sort of warning, leaving no message for me, not the slightest clue. I am on my own in the Imperial villa, among strangers.

Things are happening in the Capital this day, immense events, a convulsion of the most colossal kind. Of which we who remain at the Imperial villa will remain ignorant all day, though the world has been utterly transformed while we innocently swim and gamble and stroll around the grounds of this most lavish of all Imperial residences.

It had, in fact, begun to happen a couple of days before, when certain of the guests at the villa separately and individually left Tibur and returned to the Capital, even though Saturnalia was still going on and the climactic parties had not yet taken place. One by one they had gone back to Roma, not only Severina Floriana but others as well, all those whose absences I had noticed.

What pretexts were used to lure Prince Flavius Rufus, Prince Camillus, and their sister Princess Severina away from the villa may never be known. The two newly appointed Consuls, I was told, had received messages in the Emperor's hand, summoning them to a meeting at which they would be granted certain high privileges and benefits of their new rank. The outgoing Consul, Bassianus, still was carrying a note ostensibly from the Praetorian Prefect, Actinius Varro, when his body was found, telling him that a conspiracy against the Emperor's life had been detected and that his presence in Roma was urgently required. The note was a forgery. So it went, one lie or another serving to pry the lordlings and princelings of the Empire away from the pleasures of the Saturnalia at Tibur, just for a single day.

Certain other party guests who returned to Roma, that day and the next, didn't need to be lured. They understood perfectly well what was about to happen and intended to be present at the scene during the events. That group included Count Nero Romulus; Atticus, the shipowner; the banker Garofalo; the merchant from Hispania, Scipio Lucullo; Diodorus the gladiator; and half a dozen other patricians and men of wealth who were members of the conspiracy. For them the jaunt to Tibur had been a way of inducing a mood of complacency at the Capital, for what was there to fear with so many of the most powerful figures of the realm off at the great pleasure dome for a week of delights? But then these key figures took care to return quickly and quietly to Roma when the time to strike had arrived.

On the fatal morning these things occurred, as all the world would shortly learn:

A squadron of Marcus Sempronius Diodorus's gladiators broke into the mansion of Praetorian Prefect Varro and slew him just before sunrise. The Praetorian Guard then was told that the Emperor had discovered that Varro was plotting against him, and had replaced him as Prefect with Diodorus. This fiction was readily enough accepted; Varro had never been popular among his own men and the Praetorians are always willing to accept a change in leadership, since that usually means a distribution of bonuses to insure their loyalty to their new commander.

With the Praetorians neutralized, it was an easy matter for a team of gunmen to penetrate the palace where Emperor Maxentius was staying that night—the Vatican, it was, a palace on the far side of the river in the vicinity of the Mauseoleum of Hadrianus—and break into the royal apartments. The Emperor, his wife, and his children fled in wild panic through the hallways, but were caught and put to death just outside the Imperial baths.

Prince Camillus, who had reached the Capitol in the small hours of the night, had not yet gone to bed when the conspirators reached his palace on the Forum side of the Palatine. Hearing them slaughtering his guards, the poor fat fool fled through a cellar door and ran for his life toward the Temple of Castor and Pollux, where he hoped to find sanctuary; but his pursuers overtook him and cut him down on the steps of the temple.

As for Prince Flavius Rufus, he awakened to the sound of gunfire and reacted instantly, darting behind his palace to a winery that he kept there. His workmen were not yet done crushing the grapes of the autumn harvest. Jumping into a wooden cart, he ordered them to heap great bunches of grapes on top of him and to wheel him out of the city, concealed in that fashion. He actually succeeded in reaching Neapolis safely a couple of days later and proclaimed himself Emperor, but he was captured and killed soon after—with some help, I have heard, from Marcellus Domitianus Frontinus.

Two younger princes of the royal house still survived—Prince Augustus Caesar, who was sixteen and off in Parisi at the university, and Prince Quintus Fabius, a boy of ten, I think, who dwelled at one of the Imperial residences in Roma. Although Augustus did live long enough to proclaim himself Emperor and actually set out across Gallia with the wild intention of marching on Roma, he was seized and shot in the third day of his reign. Those three days, I suppose, put this young and virtually unknown Augustus into history as the last of all the Emperors of Roma.

What happened to young Quintus Fabius, no one knows for sure. He was the only member of the Imperial family whose body never was found. Some say that he was spirited out of Roma on the day of the murders wearing peasant clothes, and is still alive in some remote province. But he has never come forth to claim the throne, so if he is still alive to this day, he lives very quietly and secretively, wherever he may be.

All day long the killing went on. The assassination of Emperors was of course nothing new for Rome, but this time the job was done more thoroughly than ever before, an extirpation of root and branch. Royal blood ran in rivers that day. Not only was the immediate family of the Caesars virtually wiped out, but most of the descendants of older Imperial families were executed too, I suppose so that they wouldn't attempt to put themselves forward as Emperors now that the line of Laureolus was essentially extinct. A good many former Consuls, certain members of the priestly ranks, and others suspected of excessive loyalty to the old regime, including two or three dozen carefully selected Senators, met their deaths that day as well.

And at nightfall the new leaders of Roma gathered at the Capitol to proclaim the birth of the Second Republic. Gaius Junius Scaevola would hold the newly devised rank of First Consul for Life—that is to say, Emperor, but under another name—and he would govern the vast entity that we could no longer call the Empire through a Council of the Senate, by which he meant his little circle of wealthy and powerful friends, Atticus and Garofalo and Count Nero Romulus and General Cassius Frontinus and half a dozen others of that sort.

Thus, after nineteen hundred years, was the work of the great Augustus Caesar finally undone.

Augustus himself had pretended that Roma was still a Republic, even while making himself Emperor; and that pretense had lasted down through the ages. I am not a king, Augustus had insisted; I am merely the First Citizen of the realm, who humbly strives, under the guidance of the Senate, to serve the needs of the Roman people. And so it went for all those years, though somehow it became possible for many of the First Citizens to name their own sons as their successors, or else to select some kinsman or friend, even while the ostensible power to choose the Emperor was still in the hands of the Senate. But from now on it would be different. No one would be able to claim the supreme power in Roma merely because he was the son or nephew of someone who had held that power. No more crazy Caligulas, no more vile Neros, no more brutish Caracallas, no more absurd Demetriuses, no more weak and foppish Maxentiuses. Our ruler now would truly be a First Citizen—a Consul, as in the ancient days before the first Augustus—and the trappings of the monarchy would at last be abandoned.

All in a single day, a day of blood and fire. While I lounged in Tibur, at the villa of the Emperors, knowing nothing of what was taking place.

On the morning of the day after the revolution, word comes to the villa of what has occurred in Roma. As it happens, I have slept late that day, after having drunk myself into a stupor the night before to comfort myself for the absence of Lucilla; and the villa is virtually deserted by the time I rouse myself and emerge.

That alone is strange and disconcerting. Where has everyone gone? I find a butler, who tells me the news. Roma is in flames, he says, and the Emperor is dead along with all his family.

"*All* his family? His brothers and sisters too?"

"Brothers and sisters too. Everyone."

"The Princess Severina?"

The butler looks at me without sympathy. He is very calm; he might be speaking of the weather, or next week's chariot races. In the autumn warmth he is as chilly as a winter fog.

"The whole lot, is what I hear. Every last one, and good riddance to them: Scaevola's the new Emperor. Things will all be very different now, you can be sure of that."

All this dizzies me. I have to turn away, and take seven or eight gasping breaths before I have my equilibrium again. Overnight our world has died and been born anew.

I bathe and dress and eat hurriedly, and arrange somehow for a carriage to take me to Roma. Even in this moment of flux and madness, a purse full of gold will get you what you want. There are no drivers, so I'll have to find my way on my own, but no matter. Insane though it may be to enter the Capital on this day of chaos, Roma pulls me like a magnet. Lucilla must be all right, if her uncle has seized the throne; but I have to know the fate of Severina Floriana.

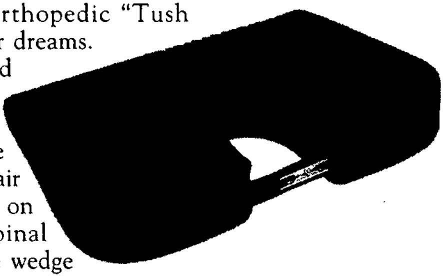
I see flames on the horizon when I am still an hour's ride from the city. Gusts of hot wind from the west bring me the scent of smoke: a fine dust of cinders seems to be falling, or am I imagining it? No. I extend my arm and watch a black coating begin to cover it.

It's supreme folly to go to the Capital now.

MAIL ORDER MALL

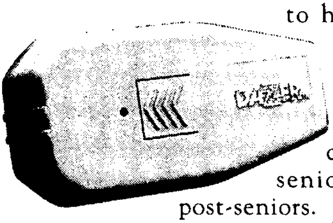
TUSH CUSH

Are you one of the millions of Americans who suffer from low back pain? Do hours of prolonged sitting leave you aching or numb? If so, the revolutionary orthopedic "Tush Cush" is the seat of your dreams. This scientifically designed seat works to relieve and prevent back pain in 2 ways: first, it suspends the tail bone (coccyx) in the air and reduces the pressure on and within the lower spinal discs; second, the unique wedge shape tips the pelvis forward to help restore the spine's natural lumbar curve. Constructed of highly resilient polyurethane foam, the "Tush Cush" comes with a removable, machine washable, dark brown cover. It measures 14"x18" and features a handle for easy toting. Perfect for home, office, auto, sporting events, theaters, wheel chairs-or anywhere your "tush" needs a "cush"ion! **$39.98 ($5.75) #A1967**



HELPFUL TO HUMANS HARMLESS TO DOGS

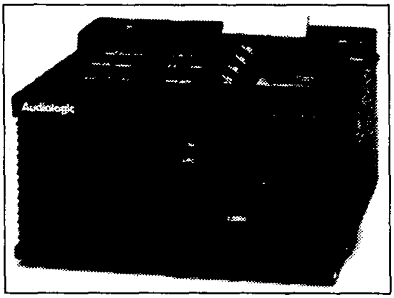
Even the most dedicated canine afficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4 3/4" long) plastic case can also clip on belt , takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids-plus the pro-verbial post-seniors. **$29.98 ($3.75) #A1829X**



TO ORDER . . .
by mail send check or credit card number and expiration date to:
CALL TOLL FREE 24 HOURS A DAY **1-800-722-9999**
MASTERCARD/VISA AMERICAN EXPRESS
30 DAY MONEY BACK GUARANTEE•For Exchange or Refund
For each item add shipping and handling charge shown ( )
to arrive at total price. NJ residents add 7% sales tax.

MAIL ORDER MALL,
Dept. 044AS
PO Box 3006,
Lakewood, NJ
08701

SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH SOUND SLEEPER



Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audio Logic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the Sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! $89.98 ($6.95) #A2000

GOURMET POPCORN POPPER

The incredible Theater II through-the handle, bottom-stirring popcorn popper uses stovetop power to reach the same temperature (465°F) as commercial poppers. Popcorn explodes to full expansion, steam damage is el-iminated, a faster finish preserves tenderness, and nearly 100% of the popcorn pops! Result: six quarts of the best popcorn you've ever tasted..in just three minutes start to finish. Faster than most microwaves, Wooden handle for a safe grip, and pops with a minimum amount of oil or butter for delicious diet popcorn. (approximately 500 calories per 6 quart). Produces tender, fluffy, old-fashioned movie theater popcorn in just minutes. Made in USA $27.98 ($5.75) #A1963

Should I not turn away, bypass Roma and head for the coast, book passage to Britannia while it's still possible to escape? No. No. I must go there, whatever the risks. If Scaevola is Emperor, Lucilla will protect me. I will continue on to Roma, I decide. And I do.

The place is a madhouse. The sky streams with fire. On the great hills of the mighty, ancient palaces are burning; their charred marble walls topple like falling mountains. The colossal statue of some early Emperor lies toppled in fragments across the road. People run wildly in the streets, screaming, sobbing. Squads of wild-eyed soldiers rush about amongst them, shouting furiously and incoherently as they try to restore order without having any idea of whose orders to obey. I catch sight of a rivulet of crimson in the gutter and think for a terrible moment that it is blood; but no, no, it is only wine running out of a shattered wine-shop, and men are falling on their faces to lap it from the cobblestones.

I abandon my chariot—the streets are too crazy to drive in—and set out on foot. The center of the city is compact enough. But where shall I go? I wonder. To the Palatine? No: everything's on fire up there. The Capitol? Scaevola will be there, I reason, and—how preposterous this sounds to me now—he can tell me where Lucilla is, and what has become of Severina Floriana.

Of course I get nowhere near the Capitol. The entire governmental district is sealed off by troops. Edicts are posted in the streets, and I pause to read one, and it is then I discover the full extent of the alteration that this night has worked: that the Empire is no more, the Republic of the ancient days has returned, Scaevola has the title not of Emperor but First Consul.

As I stand gaping and dazed in the street that runs past the Forum, I am nearly run down by a speeding chariot. I yell a curse at its driver; but then, to my great amazement, the chariot stops and a familiar ruddy face peers out at me.

"Cymbelin! Good gods, is that you? Get in, man! You can't stand around out there!"

It's my robust and jolly host from Neapolis, my father's friend, Marcellus Domitianus Frontinus. What bad luck for him, I think, that he's come visiting up here in Roma at a time like this. But I have it all wrong, as usual, and Marcellus Domitianus very quickly spells everything out for me.

He has been in on the plot from the beginning—he and his brother the general, along with Gaius Scaevola and Count Nero Romulus, were in fact the ringleaders. It was necessary, they felt, to destroy the Empire in order to save it. The current Emperor was an idle fool, the previous one had been allowed to stay on the throne too long, the whole idea of a quasi-hereditary monarchy had been proved to be a disaster over and over again for centuries, and now was the time to get rid of it once and for all. There was new restlessness in all the provinces and renewed talk of secession. Having just fought and won a Second War of Reunification, General Cassius Frontinus had no desire to launch immediately into a third one, and he had without much difficulty convinced his brother and Scaevola that the Caesars must go. Must in fact be put where they would never have the opportunity of reclaiming the throne.

Ruthless and bloody, yes. But better to scrap the incompetent and profligate royal family, better to toss out the empty, costly pomp of Imperial grandeur, better to bring back, at long last, the Republic. Once again there would be government by merit rather than by reason of birth. Scaevola was respected everywhere; he would know the right things to do to hold things together.

"But to *kill* them—to murder a whole family—!"

"A clean sweep, that's what we needed," Frontinus tells me. "A total break with the past. We can't have hereditary monarchs in this modern age."

"All the princes and princesses are dead too, then?"

"So I hear. One or two may actually have gotten away, but they'll be caught soon enough, you can be sure of that."

"The Princess Severina Floriana?"

"Can't say," Frontinus replies. "Why? Did you know her?"

Color floods to my cheeks. "Not very well, actually. But I couldn't help wondering—"

"Lucilla will be able to tell you what happened to her. She and the princess were very close friends. You can ask her yourself."

"I don't know where Lucilla is. We were at Tibur together this week, at the Imperial villa, and then—when everything started happening—"

"Why, you'll be seeing Lucilla five minutes from now! She's at the palace of Count Nero Romulus—you know who he is, don't you?—and that's exactly where we're heading."

I point toward the Palatine, shrouded in flames and black gusts of smoke behind us.

"Up there?"

Frontinus laughs. "Don't be silly. Everything's destroyed on the Palatine. I mean his palace by the river." We are already past the Forum area. I can see the somber bulk of Hadrianus's Mausoleum ahead of us, across the river. We halt just on this side of the bridge. "Here we are," says Frontinus.

I get to see her one last time, then, once we have made our way through the lunatic frenzy of the streets to the security of Nero Romulus's well-guarded riverfront palace. I hardly recognize her. Lucilla wears no makeup and her clothing is stark and simple—peasant clothing. Her eyes are somber and red-rimmed. Many of her patrician friends have died this night for the sake of the rebirth of Roma.

"So now you know," she says to me. "Of course I couldn't tell you a thing about what was being planned."

It is hard for me to believe that this woman and I were lovers for months, that I am intimately familiar with every inch of her body. Her voice is cool and impersonal, and she has neither kissed me nor smiled at me.

"You knew—all along—what was going to happen?"

"Of course. From the start. At least I got you out of town to a safe place while it was going on."

"You got Severina to a safe place, too. But you couldn't keep her there, it seems."

Her eyes flare with rage, but I see the pain there, too.

"I tried to save her. It wasn't possible. They all had to die, Cymbelin."

"Your own childhood friend. And you didn't even try to warn her."

"We're *Romans,* Cymbelin. It had become necessary to restore the Republic. The royal family had to die."

"Even the women?"

"All of them. Don't you think I asked? Begged? No, said Nero Romulus. She's got to die with them. There's no choice, he said. I went to my uncle. You don't know how I fought with him. But nobody can sway his will, nobody at all. No, he said. There's no way to save her." Lucilla makes a quick harsh motion with her hand. "I don't want to talk about this any more. Go away, Cymbelin. I don't even understand why Marcello brought you here."

"I was wandering around in the street, not knowing where to go to find you."

"Me? Why would you want to find me?"

It's like a blow in the ribs. "Because—because—" I falter and fall still.

"You were a very amusing companion," she says. "But the time for amusements is over."

"Amusements!"

Her face is like stone. "Go, Cymbelin. Get yourself back to Britannia, as soon as you can. The bloodshed isn't finished here. The First Consul doesn't yet know who's loyal and who isn't."

"Another Reign of Terror, then?"

"We hope not. But it won't be pretty, all the same. Still, the First Consul wants the Second Republic to get off to the most peaceful possible—"

"The First Consul," I say, with anger in my voice. "The Second Republic."

"You don't like those words?"

"To kill the Emperor—"

"It's happened before, more times than you can count. This time we've killed the whole system. And will replace it at long last with something cleaner and healthier."

"Maybe so."

"Go, Cymbelin. This is a busy time for us."

And she turns away and leaves the room, as though I am nothing to her, only an inquisitive and annoying stranger. It is all too clear to me now that I was merely a casual plaything for her, an amusing barbarian to keep by her side during the autumn season; and now it is winter and she must devote herself to more serious things.

And so I went. The last Emperor had perished and the Republic had come again, and I had slept amidst the luxurious comforts of the Imperial villa while it all was happening. But it has always been that way, hasn't it? While most of us sleep, an agile few create history in the night.

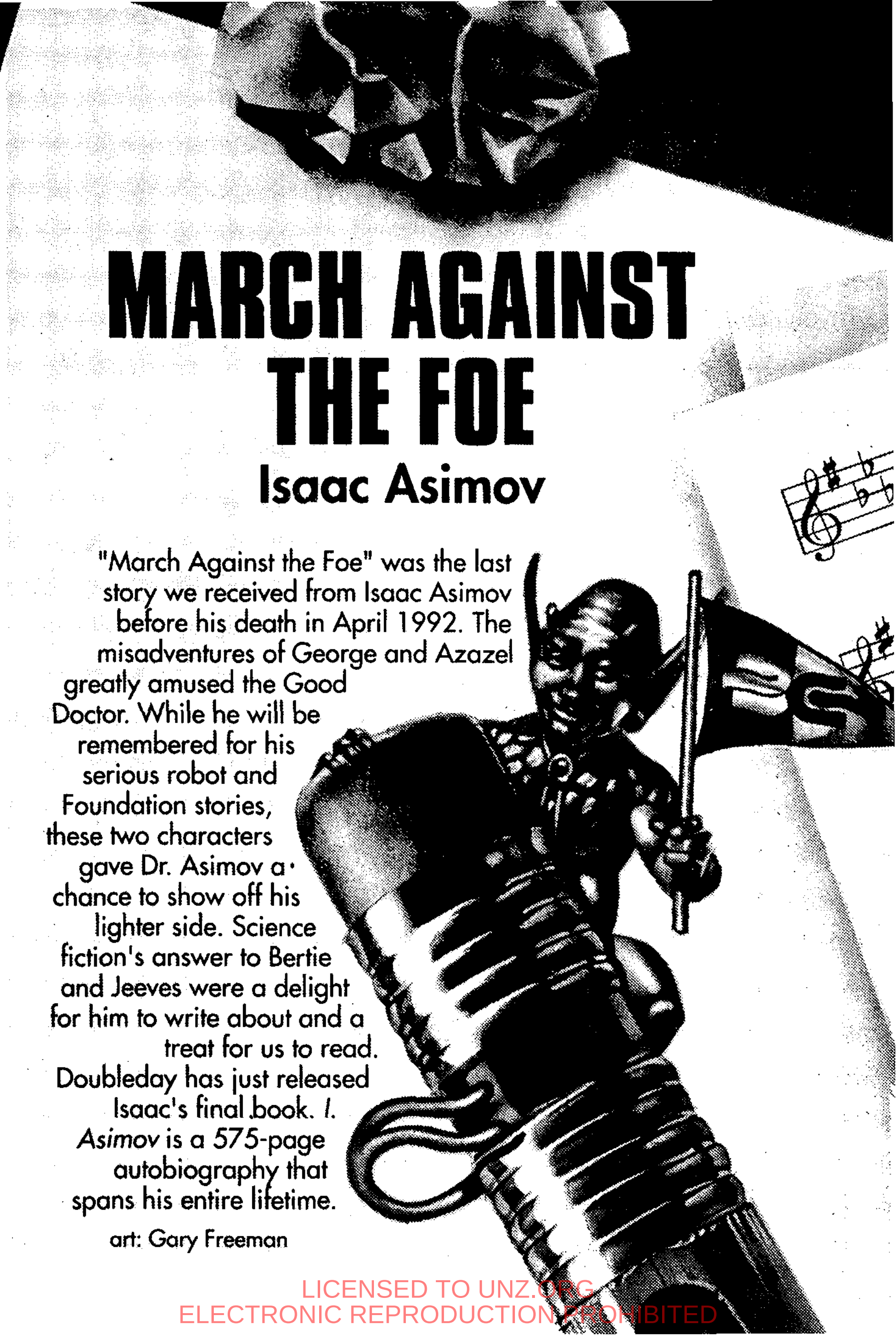
Now all was made new and strange. The world I had known had been entirely transformed in ways that might not be fully apparent for years—the events of these recent hours would be a matter for historians to examine and debate and assess, long after I had grown old and died—nor would the chaos at the center of the Empire end in a single day, and provincial boys like me were well advised to take themselves back where they belonged.

I no longer had any place here in Roma, anyway. Lucilla was lost to me—she will marry Count Nero Romulus to seal his alliance with her uncle—and whatever dizzying fantasies I might have entertained concerning the Princess Severina Floriana were best forgotten now, or the ache would never leave my soul. All that was done and behind me. The holiday was over. There would be no further tourism for me this year, no ventures into Etruria and Venetia and the other northern regions of Italia. I knew I must leave Roma to the Romans and beat a retreat back to my distant rainy island in the west, having come all too close to the flames that had consumed the Roma of the Emperors, having in fact been somewhat singed by them myself.

Except for the help that Frontinus provided, I suppose I might have had a hard time of it. But he gave me a safe-conduct pass to get me out of the Capital, and loaned me a chariot and a charioteer; and on the morning of the second day of the Second Republic I found myself on the Via Appia once more, heading south. Ahead of me lay the Via Roma and Neapolis and a ship to take me home.

I looked back only once. Behind me the sky was smudged with black clouds as the fires on the Palatine Hill burned themselves out. ●

Customer Service or Subscriber Assistance: Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to: Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, P.O. Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130 or call 1-(800)-333-4108.

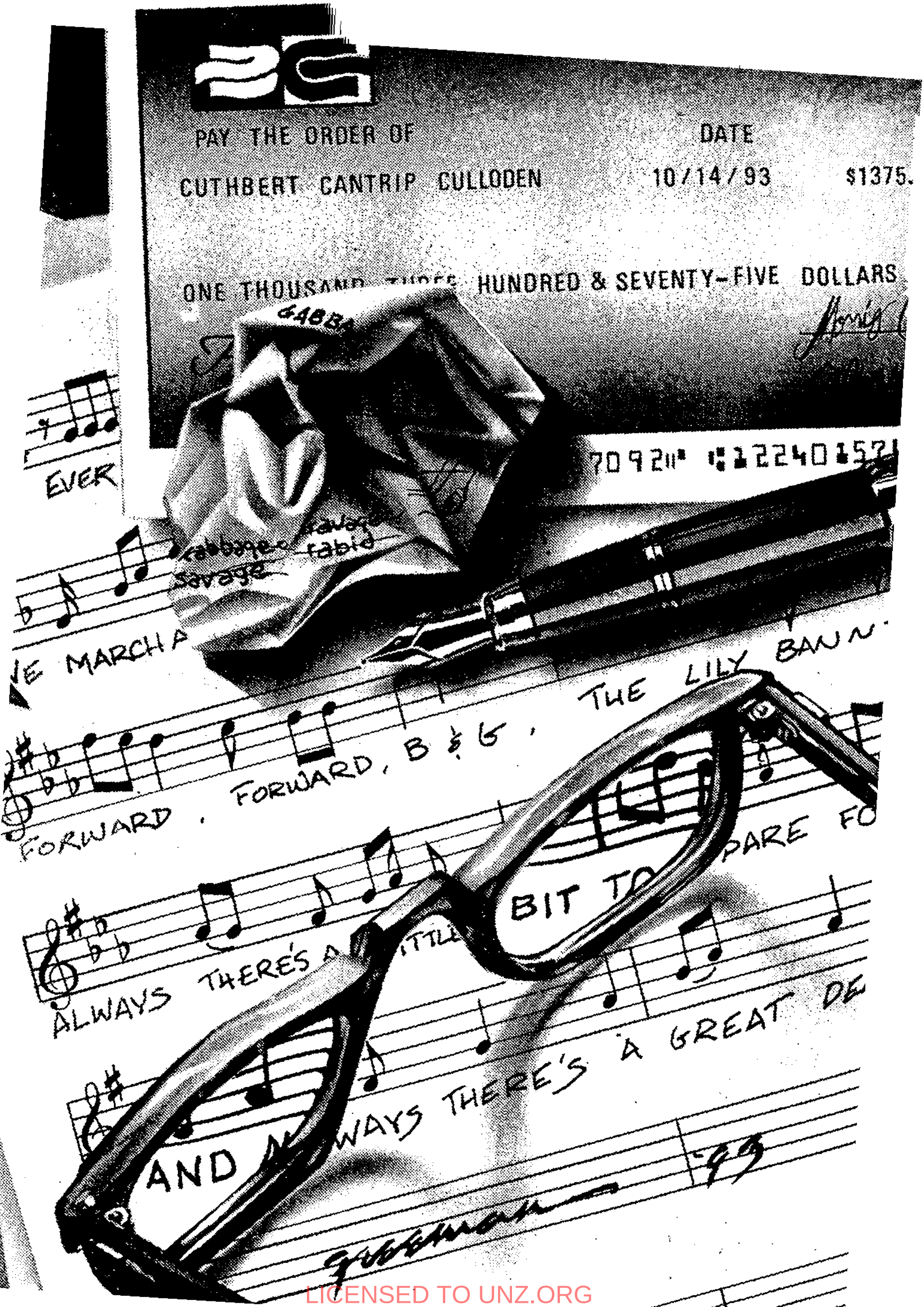


MARCH AGAINST THE FOE

Isaac Asimov

"March Against the Foe" was the last story we received from Isaac Asimov before his death in April 1992. The misadventures of George and Azazel greatly amused the Good Doctor. While he will be remembered for his serious robot and Foundation stories, these two characters gave Dr. Asimov a chance to show off his lighter side. Science fiction's answer to Bertie and Jeeves were a delight for him to write about and a treat for us to read. Doubleday has just released Isaac's final book. *I. Asimov* is a 575-page autobiography that spans his entire lifetime.

art: Gary Freeman


PAY THE ORDER OF
DATE
CUTHBERT CANTRIP CULLODEN
10/14/93
$1375.
ONE THOUSAND THREE HUNDRED & SEVENTY-FIVE DOLLARS
GABBA
cabbage
savage
rabid
savage
EVER
NE MARCH A
BANN
FORWARD, FORWARD, B & G, THE LILY
ALWAYS THERE'S A LITTLE BIT TO SPARE FO
AND ALWAYS THERE'S A GREAT DE
'93
Gibbman

"Tell me, George, have you ever thought of getting a job?" I asked.

We had finished dinner and were walking through the mellow twilight along the edge of the park. I had asked the question idly. I knew he never had.

But he did shudder and a look of nameless horror passed across his face, as though he had suddenly found himself gazing into a pit of writhing vipers.

"That is no question," he said, hollowly, "to ask a gentleman who is placidly digesting one of your less-than-scrumptious dinners."

"Why not?" I was annoyed enough at his description of the lavish meal I had provided him to pursue the subject. "Uncounted millions of human beings work for a living."

"Yes," said George. "Exactly. So they do. And I believe I am quite right to choose not to be one of their number." He heaved a sigh that seemed to come from the profoundest depths of his being. "Have I never told you the tale of Cuthbert Cantrip Culloden?"

"No, George, you haven't, and I am grateful for it. Thank you."

George seated himself at a park bench that had just been vacated by a New York gentleman of the hippy persuasion and said, "I will now tell you the tale of Cuthbert Cantrip Culloden."

Desperately, I tried to fend it off. "Culloden," I said, "is an interesting name. At the Battle of Culloden in 1745—"

Cuthbert Cantrip Culloden [said George] had been a classmate of mine at the old University. He was not a remarkable fellow and not one of his names lent themselves to the easy informality of a shortened nickname. It was, of course, impossible to call him Cuth or Cant or Rip or Cull or Loden, and we ended up—

Why, yes, now that you mention it, it might have been possible to call him Bert, but we never thought of that. It's just as well, too, for I had a better solution to the problem. I called him "Cussword," which, as a reasonable facsimile of his first name, was at once adopted by all and sundry.

That seemed to induce a certain gratitude in him. At least, he called me several cusswords in return.

These things build a friendship, you know, and all through our years at the University we remained close. And when we graduated we swore that we would remain friends through all eventualities and that, without fail, on the anniversary of our graduation we would get together, he and I, and have a drink to our old fellowship.

What do you mean, And did I? Without fail, old man. I never once failed to miss it. And I believe he never failed to miss it, either. Ah, college days.

You can imagine my surprise, then, when one day some fifteen years after graduation, I came across old Cussword, in a bar on which I was, in those days, bestowing my custom. The meeting was a beneficent one for I was busily engaged in an intricate financial deal that was failing to extend my credit for one more drink, when an arm threw itself around my shoulder, and a voice said in my ear, "This one's on me, old buddy."

And it was Cussword.

Nothing could have been more gratifying than his kindly offer and in no time at all we were engaged in those reminiscences that are the bane and dread of all college reunions. He dredged up names and events that I preferred not to remember, and I was careful to do the same for him. And all the time I watched him narrowly.

Cussword had shown no promise at the University of ever becoming prosperous unless he met a woman of sufficiently uncertain age and looks and sufficiently certain wealth. Casual questioning, however, convinced me that he had been as successful in this laudable search as I had been.

And yet there was an undefinable air of prosperity about him. The fact that he had paid for several drinks meant nothing, for anyone can have a little money in his pocket at some particular time. Rather, Cussword had a feeling to him, a kind of self-confidence that came from more than the immediate supply of coins. He exuded the kind of aura that someone would if he had a source of additional coins that he could draw on at will.

It was difficult to believe, but I felt that I was right. "Cussword," I said, with a certain awe and revulsion in my voice, "can it be that you have a *job?*"

He had the grace to redden, but Cussword was a man of integrity who would not lie without good reason, or, anyway, fair reason. "Yes, George," he said, "I have a job."

His redness deepened. "In fact, George, I'm a vice-president."

I stared my disbelief. "Of what?"

"I'm Vice President in Charge of Corporate Enthusiasm at B & G."

"What's B & G?"

Cussword told me and I continued to find everything hard to believe. "Are you trying to tell me that B & G stands for 'Bunk and Garbage?' "

"Not at all," said Cussword, with annoyance. "You're completely missing the pronunciation, George. It is not for nothing we used to call you tin-ear. The firm was founded by Morris U. Bunque and Charles F. Gabbage. Bunque is of an old English family and it comes from an old Teutonic word referring to oratorical expertise. Gabbage is of Dutch origin and is the term used in a regional dialect there to represent a rich fertilizing mixture. For some reason, though, the firm feels that 'Bunque and Gabbage' lends itself to misapprehension and 'B & G' is the term generally used."

"Very sensible," I said, "and what kind of business is B & G involved in?"

"Why, there, George," said Cussword, "you have me. I do not know. It is not my department. I am concerned only with Corporate Enthusiasm." He ordered another drink for each of us, which was a kindly thought, and said, "Let me explain Corporate Enthusiasm to you, George, for in your happy state of unemployment you, perhaps, are unaware of the complexities of modern business."

"Indeed, I am," I said, repressing a slight shudder.

"The worst problem that corporations face those days is employee disloyalty. You may think that the average employee would be intent on having the business he works for succeed, but this is not so. The average employee," and here Cussword began ticking off his fingers, "demands regular pay increases, job security, medical insurance, long paid vacations, and various other items that must all eat into the profits well earned by Bunque and Gabbage.

"When it is explained to said employees that all these demands would cut into the large annual pensions paid to Bunque, Gabbage, and several relatives; that private golf-courses and yachts are expensive to maintain and cannot be properly taken care of if money is to be wasted on employees, an ugly spirit of dissatisfaction arises, which goes to the heart of Bunque and Gabbage.

"They have decided, therefore, to cultivate a spirit of pride in B & G, an exciting feeling of working for a great corporation and putting to one side petty considerations of salary. After all, you remember the football team at the old University."

"Very well," I said.

"And you remember the pride we had in it. No one had to pay us to be proud. We would have scorned money—unless it was quite a lot. Remember that time when the team actually won a game?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, that's the spirit that was wanted at B & G. Someone at the firm happened to know me as a writer of inspirational songs at church functions and out-door barbecues, and so they came to me to create the necessary corporation enthusiasm."

"And you've written songs for the firm."

"Quite a few. My best so far is a spirited marching song that goes" (and here he sang it in a reedy tenor that drew disapproving glances from every person in the bar)

Ever onward, B & G, we march against the foe!
Forward, forward, B & G, the lily banners go!
Always there's a little bit to spare for thee and me,
And always there's a great deal more to give to B & G.

"Hmm," I said. "Very stirring. But why the lily banners? Do you have lily banners?"

"The words don't matter," said Cussword, "It's the spirit that counts. Besides, we *will* have lily banners. I'm designing a corporation flag right now that will have a fleur-de-lis design. The French, I understand, are no longer using it, and it's silly to waste it."

"But what about the little bit for thee and me and the great deal more for B & G. Is that fair?"

"Absolutely fair. Bunque and Gabbage need the money much more than the unimportant people who work for them. You have never seen their mansions. It costs a fortune to heat them."

"Yes, but do the employees think that's fair?"

Cussword looked annoyed. "There you have put your finger on a sore point, George. The employees do *not* think that's fair. I have held seminars on the subject, complete with slides of Bunque and Gabbage's personal properties and home movies of their darling children, and I can't seem to rouse any decent sort of Corporate Enthusiasm. In point of fact, I have been as good as told by Bunque, and also by Gabbage, that if I can't show results in two weeks, I will be fired."

That bothered me, as you can well imagine, old man. Not only was Cussword an old school-chum, but he had just bought me several drinks and had never mentioned a word concerning repayment. It seemed a small thing to me to try to return the favor by means of Azazel.

Azazel was, as usual, in a state of violent protest, once I had managed to drag him out through the space warp, or whatever it was that connected his world and ours.

Since he was red to begin with, he could not turn red with fury, but his two-centimeter body twitched uncontrollably, and his long spiked tail lashed back and forth. Even the small nubbins of his horns seemed to swell slightly.

"What is this?" he said. "It was only two months ago that you called me last. Am I to be at your beck and call every moment of the day and night. Am I to have no private life?"

I had no choice but to placate him. "Please, Coordinator of the Universe. There is no power anywhere in the cosmos that can do what you can do. When one is the best there is, one must expect to be called upon."

"Well, that's true enough," said Azazel, grudgingly. "But what in juguwolen do you want now?" He was sufficiently mollified to apologize at once for using that vile term. I didn't know what it meant, but when he said it his tail briefly turned blue, so it must have been powerful indeed.

I explained to him the fix in which poor Cussword had found himself.

"And you say he was a schoolmate of yours?—Ah, college days. I remember an old professor I once had, a vicious grumchik, who was supposed to teach us neuroadjustometrics but spent all his time drinking phosphoamitol and showing up for lectures unable to speak, let alone teach."

"I had a vicious grumchik, too, oh Master of the Infinite. Several, in fact."

"Poor fellow," said Azazel, wiping his tiny eyes. "Well, we will have to do something. Do you have anything belonging to him?"

"Well, yes," I said. "I managed to abstract the school pin from his lapel."

"Ah. There is, of course, no use in trying to adjust the minds of the callous and cold-blooded employees of that marvelous firm that employs him. I will instead so adjust your friend's mind as to make his views irresistible."

"Can that be done?" I asked, rather foolishly.

"Watch and see, Miserable Remnant of a Fetid Planet," he answered.

I did watch, and I did see.

Before the two weeks were up, Cussword was calling at my humble abode, face distorted into a broad grin.

"George," he said, "meeting you in the bar was a stroke of luck or something because everything has suddenly changed, and I am no longer in danger of being fired. It can't be anything you said, because, as I recall, you didn't say anything sensible at all, so it must have been the mere fact that I unconsciously compared myself to you. There I was a vibrant, handsome vice-president, and there you were, a cadging bum (a description I use without any intent to insult you, George), and the contrast was such that I just went out and licked the world."

I will not deny that I was taken aback, but he went right on without noticing how far aback I had been taken.

He said, "The entire body of employees, at 8:50 A.M., every work morning, sings 'Ever Onward, B & G' with unexampled enthusiasm. You should see, George, with what vim and vitality they march against the foe. As soon as I have the lily banners, they will wave them with enthusiasm.

"We will have parades. Everyone will wear the B & G uniform, complete with a B & G sash in different colors and designs to show the level of employment. We will march down the main street to the town square singing songs, and I have written two more."

I said, "Two more," rather dumbfounded at his daring.

"Yes," he said, "one for Bunque and one for Gabbage. The one for Bunque goes as follows:

Cheer, cheer for Morris U. Bunque
Without his wisdom, we would be sunk.
Watch him with his genial smile
That's just like a crocodile.

"Crocodile? Is that the mot juste?"

"Why, yes. He has long been known affectionately as 'Old crocodile' and he's rather proud of that."

"What about the one for Gabbage?"

"That goes like this:

O, whom do we love? Yes, whom do we love?
It's Charles F. G-A-B-B-A-G-E.
We are below and he is above
Hurrah for him and also B & G.

"The trouble is," said Cussword, "that Gabbage is difficult to rhyme. The only rhyme I could think of was cabbage, which is what he smells like, but I didn't think it wise to say so. So instead I spelled out his name. Ingenious, don't you think?"

"I suppose one could call it that," I said, dubiously.

"Well, I have no time to talk further, George. I just wanted to give you the great news. I've got to go back now and organize a snake dance for the five-o'clock whistle, one expressing the great joy every employee has had at the opportunity of working for B & G all day."

"But, Cussword, are you implying that the employees are no longer interested in pay increases and all the rest?"

"You don't hear a word of it anymore. It's all fun and games now. It's all joy and hilarity. And it's my job to make sure that every moment of every day is filled with Corporate Enthusiasm. I am sure that before long I will be made a partner in the firm."

And so it went, old man, B & G became the center of an amazing joy. It was written up in *Fortune,* in *Time* and in *Corporations Illustrated.* In the last case, CC's face appeared on the cover.

And that's the story, old man.

"That's the story, George?" I said, with astonishment. "But it ends happily. Why has that soured you on the prospects of employment?"

George rose from the park bench, and said, "I left out the last little bit, inadvertently, old man. Cussword was a resounding success. You couldn't imagine a greater one. But B & G wasn't. As a matter of fact, it went bankrupt."

"Bankrupt? Why?"

"Well, everyone was having so much fun, and there was so much singing and parading and going around in uniforms that no one did any work, apparently, and the firm just collapsed."

"Too bad."

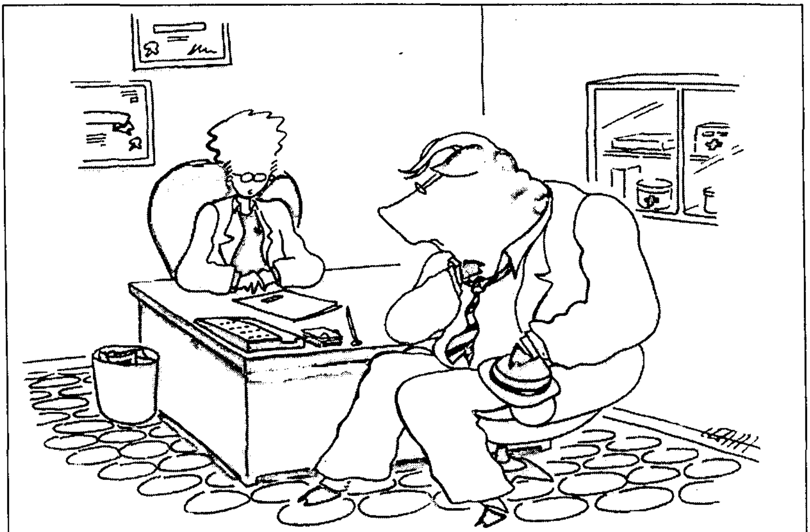
"Yes. Poor Cussword is an exemplification of the uncertainties of the corporate life. Although an enormous success, was he made a partner in the firm? No. His job simply vanished and he has been unemployed ever since. And you ask me if I have ever thought of getting a job. Why? To fail even in the midst of success? Never! Why only last week, old Cussword asked me to lend him five dollars and I couldn't. Of course, old man, if you gave me ten, I could give him half and you would be killing two birds with one stone."

I passed over the ten and said, "I suppose it would be too much to expect that I would really be killing the two of you."

George looked at the ten-dollar bill, contemptuously, and said, "Well, you won't be killing us with kindness."

"Wait, George," I called out, as he began to walk away. "What kind of business was B & G involved in?"

"I never found out," called back George. "Neither did old Cussword." ●



"Tradition aside, you might find it easier to stick to your exercise program if you tried something other than jumping over the moon."

NEXT ISSUE

One of the true giants of the field, Hugo- and Nebula-award-winner **Brian W. Aldiss** (author of such classics as *The Long Afternoon of Earth, The Malacia Tapestry,* and the acclaimed *Helliconia* trilogy), returns to these pages next month for the first time since 1986 with our dazzling May cover story, "The God Who Slept With Women." In a typical display of ferocious verve and pyrotechnic verbal brilliance, Aldiss gives us a story that's about exactly what the title *says* that it's about. But, as is usual when the gods involve themselves in the lives of mortals, there are some sticky consequences—consequences that, in this case, extend deep into the quantum realm, and threaten the continued existence of the universe itself.... This one is sly, witty, satirical, and full of bizarrely imaginative conceptualization. Don't miss it!

ALSO IN MAY: the critically acclaimed **Alexander Jablokov** takes us on a desperate suicide mission to an enemy alien planet and then back to a war-torn Earth, in a tale of intrigue, art, politics, and interstellar war that is also a bittersweet tale of star-crossed love, in the compelling "Summer and Ice"; another seminal giant of the field, **Damon Knight,** returns with his first new story for us since 1985 (he's had poetry and non-fiction here in the meantime), an incisive look at an evocative and incandescently strange society busily celebrating the mysterious holiday known as "Fortyday"; hot new writer **Greg Egan** spins a suspenseful and disturbing tale of sexual politics, corporate intrigue, and high-tech eugenics in a troubled-future Australia, in the powerful "Cocoon"; new writer **Sally McBride** makes an impressive *Asimov's* debut with a compassionate study of the consequences of love, in "The Fragrance of Orchids"; and **Greg Costikyan** takes us sideways in time for a fast-paced look, full of odd echoes of today's headlines, of a world in crisis where "The West Is Red." Plus an array of columns and features.

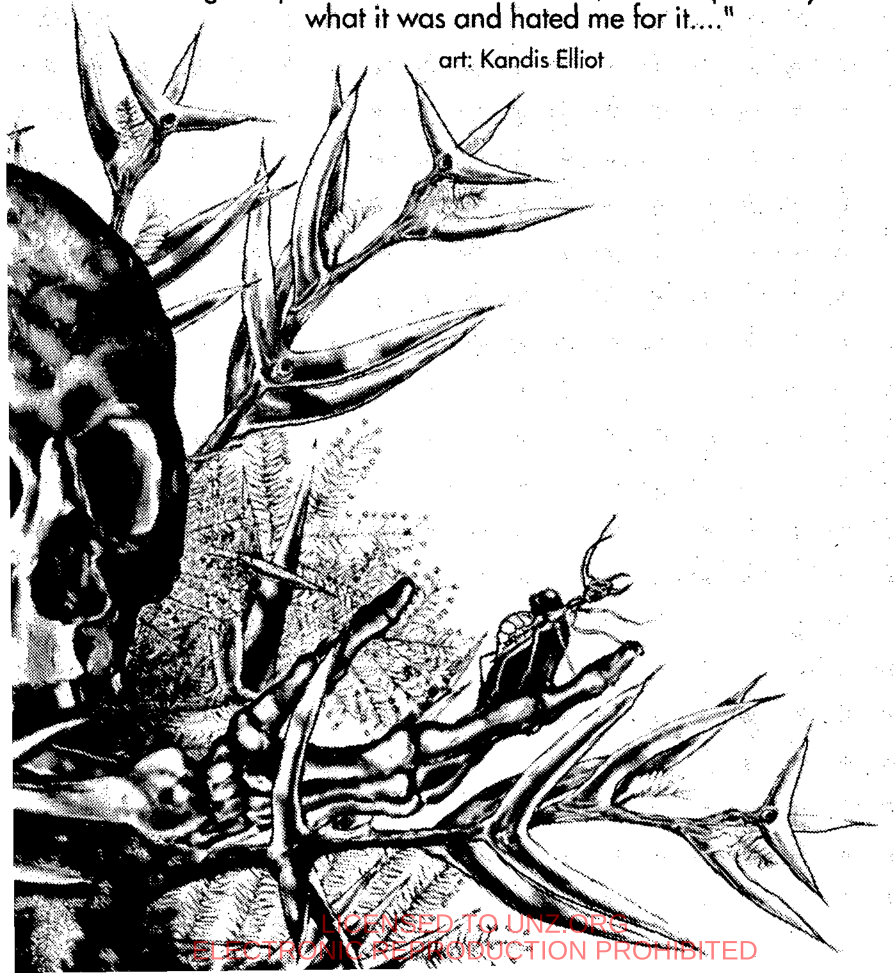
Look for our exciting May issue on sale on your newsstands on March 29, 1994.

CRETACEOUS PARK

Kandis Elliot

The author tells us that "Dodge County, Wisconsin, and my cottage therein, suffered the same floods last spring and summer as those that plagued the entire Heartland. Rainwater fortunately cleared most of the zooplankton from inundated computer drives, however, the prairie ants fled to higher ground—namely my kitchen counter. With revulsion and guilt I put out sweetened arsenic, but I suspect they knew what it was and hated me for it...."

art: Kandis Elliot



An ant cautiously tested the nervous air: something as yet unidentified, an aura, a subliminal perception of threat, had halted its steps down the broad midrib of a leaf and lifted its antennae to unseen currents of the world. The ant sought the cause of its instinctive misgivings in the wafting of dust motes, the sculptured grains of pollen suspended in jiggling dances above, the globules of mist drops. A sensory hair trapped a suspicious molecule. Salt, the base flavor of meat. Big Meat.

One molecule did not impel the ant to spray warning scent, and its upheld step lowered. The creature had no mind as such with which to muse about what had startled it, but its antennae divided their attention between tap-tapping on the tiled cuticle of the leaf, and intermittent swings in the air for another mystery molecule.

Under two greater trees that sparsely domed the sky above, the young, thorn-studded acacia tree of the colony erupted from an arena scoured of every shoot and mite. Only heavy bones, duned by excavated sand, lay exposed below—the curved bleached skeletons of Big Meat that had dared trespass near the acacia. High above the teeming arena, the ant took notice of distant movement at the edge of the cleared area, on a trail leading off through prairie grasses and thence beyond the perimeter of its world. Another worker, old, scarred, possessing only one antenna, carried a pale ovoid mass. The object looked like a giant seed from the rye-grass which the colony gathered in summer. The ant understood, in a way, that a seed it truly was—not of the rye-grass, but of the colony's people and their acacia both, and that all who did not first fall in battle would carry such a gemmule as the last act of life.

A vibration rose up from the leaf surface into receptors on the ant's six legs. The signature of a caterpillar, one of the vermin occasionally dislodged from overhead canopies of the other trees. The caterpillar, sensing its peril, surged desperately to reach the leaf's edge. Strong mandibles clamped it, and, with a deft snip, severed its ventral nerve cord. Holding the paralyzed captive high, the ant struggled from top leaves to lower, down the maze of branches to the trunk, then the awkward descent to the hill, into the tunnels among the thousands of other workers, tillers, nurses, ministers to royalty, not one of which would deign to take the load from its mandibles. Little Meat. No assistance required.

The ant deposited its caterpillar in a far underground garden, where a gardening minister pounced on the offering.

The ant retraced its steps to the upper boughs of the acacia, this time to inspect a leaf margin's fringe of plump, bright golden outgrowths. Food, gift of the acacia to its guardians, one of a hundred thousand such golden packets harvested constantly on the well-tended leaves. Antennae caressed and tasted each of the two dozen offered, the largest as big as the ant's head. It plucked one to carry back along the trail of leaves, twigs, branches, trunk, tunnels, down to those receiving ministers who waited solely for the Food. This time, upon relinquishing its burden to a minister, the ant waited. The ball was judged satisfactory and cleaved into pieces. The minister fed the ant half, then picked up the remains and headed into the royal chambers.

The ant traveled up yet again, stopping at one of the thorns arching from a twig. It climbed into the thorn's swollen base and greeted ten others in the dark, hollow interior. As the ant regurgitated a portion of Food for each, the air filled with those mysterious molecules it had sensed earlier. There could be no doubting this time. Big Meat—so near that, as the ant dashed from the thorn, the intruder's vibrations pushed air hard against the ant's face. Antennae intercepted the first waft of alarm scent from workers and tillers on the ground. The ant lifted its abdomen and sprayed its added call to battle, then ran for a leaf edge and stretched between Food-balls, its mandibles gaping for the trespasser.

Thorns spewed warriors, one hundred thousand strong. At once branches, twigs, leaves, swarmed with defenders, antennae erect and searching, mandibles snapping.

The Big Meat appeared between distant trees at the edge of the world. The ant saw it, smelled it, sensed it in the language of the air. Had the insect such capacity, it might have marveled at the Meat's now-covered, now-open eyes, the monster forelimbs dangling from its thorax, two hind legs holding it upright like a battle-weary mantis. The strange Big Meat's forelimb, with its five smaller tip-feelers extended through the air, hesitated, hovered above a small twig not yet covered by guardians, and descended upon a leaf's full golden offering of Food. Warriors rushed to the violated area, some hurtling themselves into the air.

The ant watched Big Meat draw in its limb and devour the Food, a whole leaf's worth in one swipe. It raced to follow the marauder's next descent on more Food packets. Big Meat did not hesitate this time. It grabbed another entire leaf's assortment of Food, the ripe and unripe ravaged equally. Warriors leapt onto the monstrous limb, clamped mandibles and stung hard, driving stinger and poison deep into the giant creature's surprisingly soft exterior.

The Meat lurched away, then away again as the people on the ground below drove up its legs and found vulnerable spots within the loose, hanging sheets of hide. The insolent violator came toward the hill and the acacia again. The ant perceived the smell and eruptions of old sting-marks on the monster. The insect's mind could not grant significance to signs of previous battles with acacia people, nor consider that others of its kind even existed, nor moreover conclude that such existence suggested a world even beyond the circle of grass and other trees around its colony.

The ant simply flung itself at the threat, as did thousands of its comrades at the same moment.

A great force swept the ant into the sky, stunned. It gently floated down, buoyed by the viscous air. As soon as it touched earth, it staggered into an angry, roiling mass of workers, tillers, even ministers, who had rushed to the defense of the hill. For a long time, the ant searched for its enemy, whose smell lingered strong in the thick fog of warning spray filling the acacia's clearing.

Slowly, the colony perceived that the Big Meat had been driven off. The hill calmed. Dead were dispatched, injuries attended, finally normal tasks again undertaken. The ant eventually straightened out damaged limbs and returned to leaf-gleaning, helping others to salvage broken leaves and raided Food packets.

The ant, and all its people, remained restive long after memories of the encounter faded from their limited awareness. Deep in their collective heart, they knew that the monster would return, for it had eaten of the Food of the acacia. The colony's warriors prepared themselves—as did the ministers of the gardens. Sooner or later, Big Meat would be filling their underground galleries once again.

Charles D. Farnsworth watched entomologist Susan Skhyzenovna pace his crowded office like a red-headed bohunk beetle in a bathtub. The woman had to dodge several free-standing fishtanks, an articulated tapir skeleton, and a stuffed Indonesian Komodo dragon mounted with a piglet in its jaws. Preoccupied, she ignored the obstacles until she tripped over the dragon's tail—which wove sinuously along the floor and had been cored with steel reinforcement rod by a foresighted taxidermist. That finally prompted the University of Wisconsin Zoology department's youngest member to take the chair offered her.

While his guest rubbed her stubbed toe and winced mutely, Farnsworth wondered patiently why a woman endowed with such an eloquent potential for body language had such difficulty communicating verbally with other vertebrates. She attended classes, meetings—even, he vividly recalled, an intimate campout for two in the department's cozy, if musty, field tent—as though she lived in a faceted world, only part of it visible to ordinary mortals. He watched her peer at a fist-sized piece of bright yellow-orange, fossilized pine-pitch on his desk for a full thirty seconds before she started with recognition.

"Why, *Char*ley, you *kept* it," she said. (Oh so sweetly, Farnsworth thought, clamping down hard on his inner resolve to treat fellow faculty, especially *this* one, as colleagues, nothing more. Period.)

"Oh, that?" He shrugged. "Isn't that one from the Baltic? I've rather forgotten."

TRAVEL THROUGH THE UNIVERSE WITH ANALOG

Each issue of Analog Science Fiction & Fact blazes the way to bold new discoveries. The stories in Analog begin with a scientific base that stretches beyond your imagination. Start your subscription today and travel to distant places and times where fiction becomes fact.

Subscribe today and save over 34% off the newsstand price.

☐ Please send me 18 issues for $30.97
I save over 34% off the newsstand price

☐ Please send me 12 issues for only $22.97

☐ Check enclosed

☐ Please bill me

Name ______________________

Address ______________________

City ____________ State ____________ Zip ________

MAIL TO

ANALOG
PO Box 5133
Harlan, IA 51593

Outside US & Poss. 12 for $27.97, 18 for $39.97. Price includes GST. Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery of first issue. All foreign orders must be paid in advance in US funds. We publish 2 double issues, in January and July. Each double issue counts as 2 issues towards your subscription.

MASC-6

Susan grabbed the amber and squinted into its golden depths. "For a straitlaced Brit, you're an incurable romantic, Charley. Look, there's the fossil ant inside. It's the same one you found that night we camped out in the valley. . . ." The little smile breaking the serious plain of her face abruptly vanished. She plunked the amber back on his desk and cleared her throat.

Farnsworth cleared *his* throat. "Ah, well, yes. Susan, I daresay this visit was hardly inspired by curiosity for my zoological specimens?"

Again she looked around his office in her peculiar manner, as though seeing his bookshelves, aquaria, skeletons, photographs of odd, rare and extinct animals, all superimposed on some *other* room, furtive and closeted, in her mind. That manner had originally piqued Charles Farnsworth more than any of the strange beasts around which his life usually revolved. Mysteries attracted him like iron to a magnet—especially magnets as well-tuned as Susan S., who, at one time, seemed eager to have him investigate her hidden agenda.

The protracted, green-eyed gaze finally landed on him. Did her faceted view, he wondered, still see him as a tall, dark, and dashing field researcher, hopping flights in search of Congo allosaurs or joining llama caravans seeking Peruvian Yetis? Or did she now see merely a fortyish university professor who could be as easily charmed into her bedroll as any other male faculty she'd—researched—and, Farnsworth suspected coldly, on whom she probably kept databases.

Well, he thought, if she graphed him against her other conquests, he felt quite certain that *his* data point rose as a great spike above the mean average of the rest of the department.

Susan's finger lightly caressed the smooth, gemstone surface of the amber. "Did you know that we've found viable genome fragments in amber insect fossils? My lab's cloned DNA for several bees, mosquitoes, even this ant group—"

"Oh, quite, and whole blood sucked up from dinosaurs, from which we can re-create the entire Jurassic biota. Entirely too much, Susan. Haven't we plenty of *living* animals and plants to wonder about?"

She sent a look that suggested she still wondered about *him*. "Cretaceous," she corrected. "Ants come later, just before the dino die off. But you're absolutely right. I'm here to ask whether you're still interested in the Amber Valley fauna project."

"You already have some fellow working on that, don't you?" Farnsworth knew him, of course. A swarthy Latino fifteen years his junior (thus Susan's age), and evidently a master of entomological pillowtalk. The departmental tent—and Susan—had been booked every weekend since the cad arrived. Not that any Oxford gentleman and scholar cared a fig for all *that*.

Susan nodded. "Julio García-Pérez. Exchange scholar from Costa Rica. He's interested in ants, specifically the *Myrmica*."

Sure the blighter was interested in ants. "Tropical group, isn't it? Inhabits thorn shrubs?"

"Yes. Primitive ants, very wasplike. Still retain a stinger. Julio simply adores them."

Indeed. "And what does this have to do with the Amber Valley fauna?" Scowling, Farnsworth took a guess. "Are you saying that fire ants have finally found a way to survive Wisconsin winters?"

She shook her head, leaned back, and sat as stiffly as a woman encased in an inflexible chitinous exoskeleton. Farnsworth remembered it coldly. Under summer moonlight, next to Amber Valley's golden-pebbled river, one passionate evening had metamorphosed into a Kafka-esque nightmare morning. He'd awakened not to tender endearments but to the gunning of the departmental Suburban, driven by a cockroach-cold colleague leaving him alone and ten miles deep in the refuge. He'd had to walk out. She had not explained. Susan had remained ten light-years distant thereafter.

"Not fire ants," she said. "We have one true native acacia-ant species. *Archaemyrmex Rex*. Extremely, ah, rare."

Interest flashfired. "I say! In the Amber Valley fauna? I—" he was searching his memory in vain for an ant species called *Archaemyrmex Rex*, and it came out before he could catch himself—"I wasn't aware of that."

"Well! One iota of biological trivia that Charles D. Farnsworth *doesn't* know!" She grinned smugly at the rosy hue he could feel heating his cheeks, and then proceeded to fill the shameful gap in his education. "These ants inhabit the sole species of winter-hardy thorn acacia. The tree, just like any tropical ant-acacia, produces Beltian bodies for the ants. —Little food packets," she explained quickly, although Farnsworth at least knew about Beltian bodies. "These teeny orange dingleballs on the edges of the leaves. They're of no known use to the plant itself. Evidently it grows them solely to feed the ants, which harvest them rather greedily. Our analyses show that the dingleballs are full of goodies. Proteins, sugars, vitamins, minerals—all gloriously perfect for an ant's nutritional health." Her mouth set in a grim line. "The dingleballs have other stuff in them, too. Alkaloids, for one thing."

He again caught that secret-agenda quality in her expression. Despite his resolve to be distant and strong, he could so easily remember her fascinating mind, ever involved in a different conversation on another subject in her mind. Though women, of course, at least in general, held no mystique whatso*ever* for Charles Farnsworth, he resigned himself to never comprehending pretty Susan Skhyzenovna. Especially her dumping him for a bloody exchange scholar. "Alkaloids, you say? Odd. Plants produce alkaloids as natural insecticides."

"Well, the dingleballs are full of weird molecules, and the ants not only thrive on the stuff, they protect their home tree quite vigorously. They clean the leaves, pollinate the flowers, disperse the seeds; they go so far as to strip the surrounding soil of plantlife so that vines can't twine up the acacia and compete for light. They'll even attack a cow that tries to graze nearby. Needless to say, tropical acacias with their ants removed neither live long nor prosper."

"Is that what, ah, Julio is doing?" In his spare time, that is, Farnsworth added sulkily to himself. "Studying the ecology of northern orgasms, ah, organisms? That is, acacia-ants?"

"Yes, and already he's tripled our knowledge of the species. *Rex* colonies run upward of a quarter million, dig extensive hill systems—that hill's a massive, very complex underground catacomb. Wintering caverns, nurseries, royal chambers, gardens where they grow a unique fungus called ant bread. They excavate this huge cavern just for . . . meat."

"Meat!"

Susan looked smug again. She seemed pained as well—about something else he didn't know. Yet.

"Julio's discovery," she said. "The ants store a copious supply of animal food. On the other hand, the ants never leave the vicinity of the tree." She studied him, as though expecting a reaction. "They don't hunt," she prompted.

Farnsworth could see the paradox. "They must capture every insect that walks, crawls, and flies through their front yard to stock a larder. Strikes me as a bit inadequate for a colony of the size you described."

Susan sat forward, again tense and focused. "That was Julio's research. How does a colony, whose combined biomass equals an adult lion's, keep from starving? Bugs won't do it—they need red meat. Mice. Squirrels. Rabbits. Even . . . larger prey."

"Incredible. Their stings are that venomous?" Farnsworth forgivingly considered that maybe this Julio chap possessed redeeming qualities after all, at least in his choice of scientific investigation.

"Not unless you're allergic. The stings are quite painful, but it would take hundreds to kill even a cat." Susan's elbows pressed on his big oak desk; her smooth, over-washed lab-worker's hands reached forward, palms up. Farnsworth felt his no-involvement resolve heat dangerously near to meltdown. "Charley, we've got videos of a deer carcass being stripped by the ants. In *one day* it was all gone but the bones. All underground!"

Farnsworth finally divined the nature of her visit. To humiliate him further, to "take him down a peg," as the locals liked to put it, diminish his unique reputation as a zoological investigator. He'd show her that he was quite above it all. "And now Julio has solved this mystery, I presume? As to why an animal would willfully stand in place for hours and allow itself to be stung to death by predatory ants?"

Her lovely freckled face studied him. "No," she said, hesitantly. "You see, I do the lab work, and Julio's been doing the field work—I'm so allergic to stings. Bee, ant, it doesn't matter. We needed an objective observer out with him for just one survey. But he wouldn't have anyone along. Even me, when I finally insisted, allergy or no allergy. I told him I'd stand clear of the colonies while he sampled. No dice. Then a week ago, I told him that I was going to—" a fleeting, guilty look fluttered away— "ask *you* to go out with him, Charley. Just to *look*. You're our premier biological investigator, after all, certainly the only one with the expertise to verify his observations."

Farnsworth conceded the point. "And what does Julio say? If I should be interested, that is?"

Her reply was aimed at the chunk of amber, which she now studied intently. "I haven't seen Julio since we argued. I think he wanted all the glory for himself, and when I told him that you and I were going to co-author the paper, he took off for Costa Rica to publish as sole author."

"How terrible for you. The sod!" *Gone*, praise the gods!

Charles Farnsworth absently plucked stick-tights from his tweed jacket while he studied the ant hill. It mounded in an extensive grassland spotted here and there with burr oaks and shagbark hickories in early autumn bronze. Susan Skhyzenovna had mapped the five acacia-ant colonies in the valley, all reachable by a one-day circular trek on foot. He'd had to leave the Zoology department's rusty Suburban at the Amber Valley Wildlife Refuge parking lot. Which was also the barnyard of Alphonse Judziewicz, one of several Dodge County farmers to discover that selling Cretaceous amber trinkets was a far more lucrative business than marginal dairy farming—no matter if the amber was plastic and the "fossils" unfortunate carpenter ants from abandoned outhouses. Not that the valley was misnamed; Farnsworth's careful eye had found dozens of the brilliant, ancient stones, which continually washed out in the refuge's entwined river system. But the valley stretched county-wide, with motor vehicles, save for the occasional lovers' sneak-in, prohibited. For most tourists, bug-laced ersatz amber served well enough.

Farnsworth continued his cautious examination of the first hill, and tried to feel enthusiasm for its rarity, if nothing else. For little else there was; something had ravaged the colony. The acacia, a shrubby tree that might have reached his own six-three if it still possessed leaves, was nearly denuded, its thorny but snapped and ragged branches cowering into a crippled bush. Around its main trunk and extending as far as the tree's canopy had reached, lay a once-cleared area, now littered with fallen leaves, acorns, hickory nut-hulls, and bootprints. At first, Farnsworth supposed that the ants had abandoned the area, but then he noticed tiny motes moving about the sinewy, gray acacia bark. More ants, perhaps a hundred in all, crept forlornly on the earth below the tree.

Not many citizens, Farnsworth thought, for a nest recorded one month ago as possessing an estimated hundred thousand.

The ants, evidently growing aware of his presence even ten feet beyond the colony's old perimeter, surged from their aimless lethargy. He watched them bolt faster and faster from ground to tree to ground, several hundred more appearing ostensibly from nowhere over the ruined branches of the acacia. Another score spilled out around the base of the tree, from a hill apparently in better condition than other parts of the estate. A faint but distinctive odor of formic acid bloomed in the air.

"Well, at least whatever left you in such a dreadful mess was not after your coffers," Farnsworth ventured. "Had you been honeybees, your Queen's very bedchambers would surely have been plundered." The sound of his voice excited the ants still more. He could have sworn he heard an angry, or perhaps terrorized, buzzing, and felt profoundly glad they couldn't fly. More and more of them seemed to turn from random scuttling and head by fits and starts in his direction. He took several steps to the rear, and lifted the field radio out of his heavily loaded backpack.

"Farnsworth here."

"Coming in loud and clear, Charley," the entomologist's voice responded from a picnic table at the refuge parking lot. "What've you got?" She had nearly insisted on making this final survey with him. He had nearly agreed, but for once read simple fear in her eyes. If she hadn't given a thought to insect stings on her one-night excursion to the valley with him, she certainly dreaded such exposure now. No doubt she'd learned more than she bargained for during her laboratory tests with the ants.

"I'm at the first hill, Susan. It's in a state. Something defoliated the acacia. I see several old tracks, all the same chap. Julio, I'd presume."

After a long hesitation, she said, "Most likely. There aren't any tourists this time of year. And Julio said that he'd learned tricks to get close to the hill without disturbing the ants."

"They're disturbed now. What do you suppose attacked the colony?" He could suppose only one thing.

"I can't imagine. I mean, even in the tropics, *nothing* messes with them."

"Susan, isn't it slightly conceivable that Julio himself might have sprayed a little weed killer on the acacia? Some Raid in the anthill?"

"What? *Why?*"

Idiot woman. "Revenge, of course. You threatened to take away his chance at glory, so he destroys the ants to ensure that you can't publish a landmark paper, either. You may not believe this, my dear, but some men are not above nefarious deeds when they feel betrayed." Or dumped, he added to himself.

Susan bought none of it. "No way, Charley. Not Julio. Sure, he wanted to scoop me, but he loved the ants so much that he couldn't stay away from them. In fact, he probably didn't want anybody else out there in order to *protect* them. Look what publicity did to the Monarchs' wintering site." She paused at some thought. "No, Julio simply wouldn't trash an ant colony. Not for revenge."

For what, then? Farnsworth looked at the radio in his hand. "All right. Shall we go through the checklist? Tree is—was—approximately two meters tall, hill's at least forty centimeters in diameter—" He described gross features, which Susan checked off her list, verifying Julio García-Pérez's last reports on the site.

In the back of his mind, Farnsworth wondered what folly a man might embrace for love, of ants or otherwise. After all, here he *himself* stood, playing the dray-horse under gear sufficient for a walkabout in Dartmoor. Driven to it, his mind asserted, by a sudden insatiable curiosity about ants.

"When the ants calm down a bit, I'm going to try to take a closer look at the tree. Maybe this hill had an encounter with a wayward crop duster. I'll get some samples to rule out chemical treatment."

"*Please* be careful, Charley," Susan cautioned. "Remember, don't step into the colony's cleared area." An oft-repeated warning, but did he detect actual concern in her voice this time? Farnsworth's knees went a bit weak. He quickly signed off, and repacked the radio.

The acacia's dried leaves had blown over the prairie, and he easily packed a collection bag. He studied the bootprints around the hill again—unmarred by the heavy rain three nights ago. If a pouting Julio had left for Costa Rica last week as Susan attested, then either the man had made a quick round trip, or somebody else had fallen in love with ants.

The hill did not calm for as long as he stood there. After an hour, he pulled a map and compass from his pocket and walked off in the direction of the next nearest colony. Halfway there, by his calculations, he found a small branch from an ant acacia. Its thorns readily identified it, spines erupting as long and thick as a finger and curving like miniature horns of fighting bulls. A tiny hole perforated each of the thorns. Several of the surgically sharp points were coated with dried blood.

As he gingerly held the vicious twig, an electric sensation exploding to fiery pain pierced the ball of his thumb and shot through his hand. He dropped the twig, immediately realizing that at least one ant, whose loyalty would shame a Buckingham Palace guard, had remained at its station all this time. The dark-red, skinny-looking ant had its mandibles clamped to his palm.

Incredulous at its sheer impertinence, Farnsworth hesitated long enough for the creature to sting him a second time before reflexes knocked it off. He then saw several more ants on the ground, exiting holes in the thorns. He jumped away from the twig and held his stung hand, marveling at the pain. Already it soared through his wrist and halfway up his arm.

"Bloody hell!" He sucked in a breath and waited until the throbbing subsided; when his hand numbed a little, he peeled off his backpack and found a wallet of collecting tools. A forceps soon captured one of the milling ants, which seemed confused and hesitant to leave the surface of the twig. He studied the tiny creature under a hand lens. Slender, smaller than a common black ant, it looked decidedly waspish, especially its long stinger jabbing at the forceps-tips. Farnsworth fancifully thought he detected a primeval, dinosaurian gleam in the minuscule eye. "You have extracted a dram of retribution, my wee sleekit beastie. Lord knows, you probably deserve some." Mandibles snapped at the hand lens. "You just got the wrong man."

He hoisted the backpack and started off once again. His swelling hand ached as though broken.

At ten in the morning, he reached the second hill. Farnsworth had been smelling acrid alarm pheromones for nearly a quarter kilometer; even with that warning, the visage of sheer pandemonium stunned him.

This hill had been more recently ravaged. The acacia, though not wholly defoliated, still bled fresh sap from numerous snapped twiglets. Tattered leaves hung wilting from broken petioles; green scraps lay scattered over the otherwise carefully scoured veranda surrounding the colony's mounding hill. Ants by the tens of thousands covered the acacia and the earth below it like a red-brown, vibrating blanket. Their ricocheting bodies, snapping mandibles, and million frantic foot-falls created a staccato clicking in the air, an eerie hushed cry of violation and alarm.

Farnsworth watched the activity for twenty minutes, studying what he could through binoculars. Even ten strides away, he could see the ants' awareness of his presence. Within moments of his arrival, the milling blanket had migrated toward him; it now pressed against some invisible territorial periphery past which only a few bravest souls dared to venture. Farnsworth marked the significance of it: even under the most pressing duress, the ants refused to leave their castle grounds. If food—meat—did not come willingly to them, they would surely starve.

Since it was now obvious that no spurned lover wielding herbicide had damaged the acacia, the event, Farnsworth mused, must be linked to whatever phenomenon kept the ants feeding on red meat, and in this instance the intended prey had fought its way to freedom.

Why in the world would any creature venture into that formicidian hell in the *first* place?

The binoculars were powerful enough to reveal Beltian bodies, Susan's "dingleballs," beading the edges of undamaged leaves. From afar, the acacia had appeared a chlorotic-looking chartreuse. He could now see that the leaves were actually healthy green even this late in the season, as clean and shiny as though the ants daily mopped and waxed them. Distance falsified the plant's true color by mixing chlorophyll with the glowing hue of the dingleballs, which glistened like Lilliputian persimmons.

The anthill itself, like the first hill, was not appreciably harmed. At least no effort had been expended digging down into the colony's chambers, certainly not like the energy lavished on the poor tree. The single heelprint marring the hill's grainy cone seemed placed unintentionally, as if someone—Julio García-Pérez?—stumbled into it during his research activities. Farnsworth envisioned the young man cautiously approaching the colony and deftly collecting what data he could while the ants discussed whether to attack or tolerate. Surely he would have known better than to touch the acacia, or disturb the ants unnecessarily in any other way. Although even a benign scientist would inevitably be driven off, Farnsworth knew that quiet scientific observation would not have left the ants *this* agitated.

Drying blood clots speckled the ground between leaf shreds.

Why, Farnsworth wondered again, would *any* creature want to attack acacia-ants? Some bird, perhaps, feeding on the insects? But any bird able to dodge the ants' defenses would soon satiate itself, with little cost to the colony and certainly none to the estate.

Some large animal that, once accidentally stung, became so filled with maddened rage that it struck back in retaliation? Could any animal, Farnsworth mused, remembering (and still feeling) his own ant stings, be so suicidally balmy? This acacia possessed a trunk like a man's leg and rose a good ten feet above the clearing. What Wisconsin beast of the field might be capable of damaging a fair-sized woody shrub? A raccoon? Bobcat? Certainly not a clawless herbivore, a white-tailed deer or wayward dairy cow.

He gazed thoughtfully around Amber Valley, following the patches of trees to where they solidified into a line of fall color at the banks of the valley's main river tributary. Down there somewhere, one June night he'd been sitting by a campfire, sorting a collection of good amber stones from a day's diving, swimming, playing—Farnsworth had barely remembered that he *could* play—with a woman as beautiful and coltish as spring's Persephone; and, she being young, he being at least young at heart, there followed the inevitable night of passion which left her sighing in his arms, him wondering what he ever saw in the bachelor's life, and the department's old tent mustier than ever. Even now he could not fathom what he'd done, or *not* done, to chase her off at morning's light. Never had she offered the slightest hint to clarify the mystery. All he had left to convince him that the episode truly occurred was the amber. The beautiful, unique, so-ancient amber from this equally exceptional never-never world which God, or perhaps Old Nick, deigned to place in Wisconsin's prairie heart, whose mystery had called him away from Oxford so . . .

Abruptly, Farnsworth turned to the acacia ants and realized why he'd been unfamiliar with such a piquing species as *Archaemyrmex Rex*. With her penchant for non-communication, Susan had failed to clarify the fact that Wisconsin's Amber Valley acacia ants comprised the *only colonies in existence*. He'd bet the rent on it!

And why, he reflected, would a glaciated state with no unique flora or fauna, suddenly *have* one?

The ants were now building a wall at the precisely determined edge of their home territory, the bricks their own bodies. They seemed a force of such magnitude that, had a resurrected carnosaur lumbered out of Wisconsin's frozen Cretaceous amber and headed straight to the ant species with whom it had once shared the Earth, Farnsworth was convinced that its bloody skeleton would be reposing under the acacia at this very moment. The insects' potent pheromones clotted the air like ozone pollution, their voiceless swirling hissed in a growing siren of accusation and outrage.

This rabid activity, aimed at *him,* struck at Farnsworth's most primordial instincts. He turned and walked off, resisting a startlingly powerful urge to run. As he pushed swiftly and noisily through brush and tall grass, he noted that he had yet to chase up a rabbit, a deer, even a meadow mouse from this protected wildlife refuge.

He pulled out the radio and reported in. "Farnsworth h—"

"Charley! I've been so *worried*. It's been a half *hour*. What've you been *doing?*"

"Walking, of course. Your anthills are several kilometers apart, my dear." He frowned at the entomologist's unwarranted histrionics. "I've just visited hill number two. That one's also been damaged. Some bugger certainly has it in for Julio's beloved ants. But you were right, it isn't chemical warfare."

The radio stayed silent for a long moment. Then: "Did . . . you see what it was?"

"No. But I'll bet that poor devil is in hell's own torment right now. The ants are right berserk."

"It's so unbelievable. No, paradoxical. The ants *need* prey animals. Yet they *drive off* intruders! That was one of the things Julio and I argued about. Do the ants actually *attract* prey, or just make use of the bodies they can't repulse?"

"And they're certainly good at repulsion," he murmured. "I'll be hanged if I know why the ants don't all starve. I can tell *you* one sting would be enough to send a horse—"

"Charleydidsomethinghappen?"

"I got stung—"

The radio screeched. "I'll call Med Flight! Their helicopter can be there in fifteen minutes!"

"For pity's sake, Susan, whatever has become of your clinical detachment?" Then he recalled her supposed allergy to stings. "Now listen, my dear, I am quite flattered by your concern—" actually, he felt a surge of vexation that she thought him so vulnerable, if not incompetent—"but please save it for such time as I require it. I merely picked up a broken twig from one of the acacias, and it still had a guardian."

"Oooow, Charley—"

"Tut-tut. And perhaps it was fortunate that I experienced an isolated attack. I shall henceforth certainly treat the colonies with all due respect. Get out your list. Here are the particulars on number two." He recited measurements from memory while continuing his trek. Even though he moved crosswind, he still detected formic acid in the air. "My map shows the next two hills to be equidistant from where I am now. That's approximately a half-kilometer beyond hill number two. Any preference as to which I should visit first?"

"Depends if you want to head uphill or down. The east colony lies close to the river."

He glanced westward, then east toward the line of trees winding along the center of the valley. He could see blue sky reflected from the river's surface peeking here and there in the distance.

"In fact," Susan added, "the river colony's hardly half a mile from our old campsite. Remember? We had no idea how close we were to biological history in the making." She giggled. Then went dead silent.

Farnsworth found himself staring at the radio in his hand. "That was, uh, quite a night," he said awkwardly.

The delayed response was just as awkward. “I, uh, never forgot, Charley.”

He hesitated. Then, softly: “What happened, Susan?”

“Charley, I, um, we’lltalkaboutit.” She began to rattle off descriptions of the anthills under consideration.

Sighing, Farnsworth looked around in hopes that the prairie itself sequestered some answer to his question. His gaze was pulled to a bed of crushed grass a few strides east, and he strolled over to the area. Something had fallen heavily, something bleeding, something at the time still battling for its life. Among the flattened weeds lay several broken acacia thorns and a sprinkling of mashed ants.

When Susan’s travelogue ended, he said, “I’ll take the eastern colony first. I should be there noonish. Ring you at lunchtime.”

He signed off, resettled the backpack, and walked east.

He’d been downwind of the third hill and smelling formic acid for half an hour; nearing the site, he looked down to blink away tears from the concentration of ant pheromone, and for some reason focused on the tiny movement of an ant by his foot. An acacia-ant, struggling through the tangle of weed roots and grass culms, carrying what looked like an oat. Remembering the ants’ absolute refusal to leave their home arena, Farnsworth quickly scanned for a nearby, unmapped colony from which the little gleaner had lost its way. Hill three’s thick odor came on the breeze, but no nearer yellow-green acacia lay in sight; only the dead tangle of an oak windfall straight ahead. His ant had meanwhile vanished, and looking right and left for it, he spied a man’s boot.

A high-rise, thick leather field boot. Scoured and punctured by surgically sharp thorns. The frayed and broken laces dangled with wads of burrs, mud, a few small acacia spines knotted into them. The inside of the boot had been greased by blood where thorns pierced deep through the leather. As he flipped the tongue back to reveal the sweat-run ink initials “J.G-P.,” his eye caught a movement in the windfall ahead.

A field jacket, snagged on an oak branch, wavered in the breeze. Like the shoe, it was impossibly knitted with burrs and spines from prairie plants, thread-noosed ants caught by their own mandibles and stingers, acacia thorns that had sewn themselves through the fabric. Dried as well as sticky-fresh blood and foul yellow clots of pus mucked the ends of the sleeves and the jacket’s neckline. The ripped lining in the armpits was white-ringed with salt, and still damp.

Farnsworth checked the pockets—empty except for an inadvertent weed-seed collection—then let the jacket dangle on the branch which had snared it from its wearer. A wearer too much in a hurry to skirt a fallen tree in his path, too tired to pull back and untangle himself from a branch, but who instead simply tore free of the obstruction and dashed on, one foot shod, one foot leaving blood spots on trampled grass. Farnsworth could see the trail easily from his vantage point on the windfall's horizontal trunk.

He wiped his hands with his kerchief and followed the trail, knowing where it would lead, and what he would find at the end of it.

In the dappled shade of hill number three's acacia, Julio García-Pérez lay on what had been his face less than an hour ago. The ants had already stripped his skull. A highway of red-brown workers marched into the nose holes; another living highway, carrying whitish material, streamed from an eye socket and down a hill entrance. Through binoculars at a ten-stride distance Farnsworth watched the movement of the ragged shirt and trousers, imbued with life by a thick layer of ants beneath. An arm extending beyond a ripped shirtsleeve lay utterly pocked with welts, some crusted and days old, most bulging with purple infection. Ants used the boils as access points to the flesh beneath, exiting with pus-coated bits of wet red meat. Farnsworth forced himself to look elsewhere.

Either because of the smell-saturated air or because the work focused their attention, the ants did not notice him as quickly and unanimously as had those of the other violated hills. He was able to discern that number three's acacia remained undamaged; only a lengthy scrutiny found a few plucked twiglets. Some of the missing leaves lay on the ground, others peeked from Julio's clenched and gory fingers. Ants were in the process of retrieving all. Including, Farnsworth noticed, a leaf jammed between the skull's picked-clean teeth.

He backed off another ten paces and removed his field pack. He took out the radio slowly, deliberating what to say. "Farnsworth. I'm at the east colony, Susan."

"And right at lunchtime, just like you—"

He cut her off. "I've found Julio." His voice must have conveyed the news. Silence bespoke her comprehension. "I'm terribly sorry, Susan. He's dead."

"Charley . . . are you *sure?*"

He glanced at the corpse. "Quite. It's obvious that he's the one who's been raiding the ant colonies. Has been for days. He evidently kept enough of his senses to escape before the stings put him down, but he was pretty far gone when he got to this colony. These chaps finished him off."

"He'd . . . been desensitized," she whispered. "Or he would never have escaped the first hill."

Stung to death. Stung for *days*, Farnsworth knew, at every raided hill, the welts and cruel thorn stabs festering unnoticed, along with the loss of field equipment, clothing, reason.

When Susan did not respond further, he said, "Forgive me if this seems a bit cold, dear, but it appears that Julio discovered how the ants manage to fill their meat lockers. The cattle are *summoned,* by some absolutely undeniable beacon."

"Don't go near the tree! Charley—turn around and come back. *Now!"*

And Susan knows, or at least suspects, what the agent might be. That deduction had taken far too long, Farnsworth thought angrily. Terrible to go soft in the head. He found himself impelled to seek the acacia leaves clutched in hands quickly turning from meat to bone; simultaneously envisioned the other damaged—*defoliated*—acacias.

"We considered it might be the stings," Susan was saying, "Maybe narcotic, stupefying the prey animals—"

"I can vouch that's not the case. And at any rate, that idea could have been easily tested. In the *laboratory,* dear."

"We *tested,* Charley. All we found was a venom similar to that of wasps. I told you it takes over a hundred stings to kill a cat."

"Good Lord. You mean that wasn't conjecture?"

"Lab analyses can't always reveal what's going on in nature. There's endless precedents. Poison-dart frogs lose their toxicity in the lab. No one knows why. Perhaps something in the hill lets ants adjust their stinger toxin, or maybe different castes have different biochemistry. We had to *test* it."

Farnsworth's mind started to run hot and cold and make connections. She'd known all *along* that Julio hadn't left town; that he'd been missing in the field for a week—where she'd *sent* him, to investigate something that Susan Skhyzenovna had been afraid to go out and test herself. Susan, who hadn't been afraid of insect stings during any of the dozen weekends for which she'd commandeered the Zoology field tent.

"Charley, please come back now. I want you out of there. I mean it. We'll both return in biosuits and research the colonies together."

So concerned about my well-being. How compassionate. How novel. "Allow me to save you the trouble, my dear. As you yourself so kindly pointed out, I am the premier solver of zoological puzzles." Someday he might even learn how an impossibly viable *Archaemyrmex Rex* recently melted intact from a river-eroded chunk of perfectly petrified rosin. "Tell me, Susan, those genome fragments you cloned from amber insect fossils—do you suppose a clever entomological geneticist could hypothetically insert them into, say, a fertile egg? From which, say, an entire new colony could be cultured? In the lab, of course. One would hate to have the experiment escape to the wild. Killer bees and all that."

"Well. Ah. Hypothetically."

"It'd make quite the landmark paper, wouldn't you say? But I stand before a real colony this very moment. Let us set the hypothetical aside while I investigate a living mystery."

"Don't—"

"As you also observed, the ants sting merely to defend home and hearth. They kill because an occasional victim willingly stands still long enough to be stung to death. Has empathy on the part of its dinner created this entire species? Probably not, so let us reason with *logic*. What helps the ants survive all summer? What cannot itself survive without the symbiotic association? What *must* guarantee a full larder, so that one's cleaners and protectors, maids and butlers, footmen and Imperial army, should be consistently available, healthy, and doting?"

"Charley, don't go near the tree!"

"Why not? You've been giving me that command from the start of this trek. Have you no curiosity? Or do you already *know?"*

"I don't know! Julio wasn't even sure if the meat fed the ants—or the acacia! *Please—"*

He took a step toward the colony. The ants remained oblivious to him. He took another step and another, until he stood at the sharp demarcation between prairie and the colony's private arena. The acacia retained its full complement of foliage. How did it do it? How did it hypnotize prey for its ants? Even as his eyes riveted to the barely visible gold dots ringing the acacia leaves, Farnsworth could smell a cloying sweetness, cutting through the heavy odors of blood, death, and ants.

Suddenly he dropped the radio and headed straight for the acacia.

"Charley? *Charley?"* the radio screamed behind him.

The ants were fully occupied. His rapid strides had taken him without protest right up to the tree, to the Beltian-body producing leaves that appeared to raise their laden heads toward his hand and drop one tiny golden orb onto the tip of his finger.

"Charley, what's going on? What are you doing?"

His boot-tips pressed against Julio's undulating pantlegs. A movement like a thin breeze tugged Farnsworth's own trouser cuffs. He peered at the dingleball on his fingertip, a shiny, liquid amber drop no larger than a mustard seed. It clung, seemed to send down roots, tap into his very blood.

"Charley! Where are you? Answer me! Charley! Charles Dickens Faarns-werrrth—"

He raised the dingleball to his lips.

An ant stung him on the calf. Just as unheeded, the shrill radio voice far away on the prairie died in his ears. A *glow* melted on the tip of his tongue, spread through his mouth, his body, his brain. A bright fireball of ambrosia, a delightful physical confusion surpassing the moment of orgasm, outshining the soul-rapture of symphony, a stirring of ecclesiastical transcendence. . . .

Ants had found him out. Distantly, he remarked them hurling out of thorns and pouring forth on branches that seemed to point at him in fickle accusation. Ants deserted the corpse at his feet and surged upward on his legs. Stings pierced his fingers, hands, his face where it brushed against the acacia. His eye focused on the bright golden balls that, in his altered perception, now took on the proportions of true persimmons. He plucked one, another, another, pushing them into his mouth feverishly, each taking him on its soaring trip to ecstasy, no number of them ever enough, meant for the appetite of an ant, not a man, not enough, never enough, *more*, he had to have *more*. . . .

. . . darkness broken by images of falling, rising, stripping the acacia, head giddy, blood urgently demanding, his thousandfold-heightened senses now easily detecting the calling siren of the acacia in the air, agonizing fire lapping distantly, ignorably, over his skin . . .

a roaring wind . . .

weakly struggling against an encircling rope . . .

Charley. Charley. . . .

"Charley! It's *Susan.* You're *safe* now. Can you hear me? Oh, *look* at you! Charley, *please* wake up—"

He blinked, vaguely trying to focus with eyes swollen nearly shut. His brain drifted in and out of two rooms; in one raged a vicious craving to do something, to *find* something, something he had to have at all cost—the other room seemed to be a helicopter bay. The roar of chopper blades filled his ears, and he barely understood shouted words from some woman holding his shoulders in her lap as he lay sprawled on a metal floor.

"It'll be okay, Charley. We'll be at the university hospital in just a few minutes. I'm taking you right to detox. They're as dangerous as Julio said they were. I'm calling the Turtle River crop dusters as soon as we're down, it won't happen to anyone ever again. Oh, *dear* Charley, you were supposed to stay *away* from the trees, just get *interested.* I never wanted you hurt! That night on the river, you were so *wonderful,* but I knew you were a confirmed bachelor and it scared me how hard I was falling for you and then I saw that this one fossil ant egg in our collection looked strange and almost alive yet and I got this incredible idea and if you want to know the truth I hoped this whole colony-check thing might be a way to, well, get us *together* again—"

More words were said, and Farnsworth found his mind growing quite interested in deciphering just what they meant. Something to do with an intimate campout for two, a tent, a river of amber jewels. . . .

* * *

The ant staggered under its burden. Its legs did not coordinate right, an effect of the bad air that had hit the colony and rendered so many of its people far worse off. But the ant did not heed added strain nor begrudge extra effort. It was doing the last task any of its people aspired to do, and the ant was, in its way, happy.

Upraised mandibles held the Seed over its head. For two days and two nights, the ant had walked without food or rest, following an innate sense that directed it from within. As its spastic footfalls finally halted, that same instinct drove it to lay the Seed on the earth and begin to dig. Weak and sick, the ant conserved just enough energy to bury the waiting Seed at the precise depth to ensure survival.

Afterward, the ant crouched over the spot on the earth where the seed was buried, and waited for death. So did a host of its fellow workers this night, who had likewise buried ten thousand similar gemmules, each comprised of one acacia seed and one ant egg, both specially conceived, grown, and united.

The insect understood, with a cognizance twisted in the depths of its genes, that it, too, had sprung from such an immortal gemmule, one atom of the larger organism consisting of the people and their acacia both. In fact, the ancestral memory was clearer, in a way, than much newer memories involving birth and life here on this new world. That past life had run its course such a very long time ago, but memories burned into surviving DNA saw another ant carrying an ancient Seed, remembered other Big Meat that was never covered with inedible, loose skin. Those old enemies stood even taller, and their scaly, tough hide took finesse and luck to sting effectively. An eye, an ear, a cloaca—nonetheless, Big Meat of the past filled the people's galleries with red salty meat as fully acceptable as any cut from beneath the new animals' soft, furry bodies. Hopefully, these new ones would not vanish as inconveniently as did as the old Big Meat, when colonies of the people had begun to span the globe.

The ant's poisoned legs slowly contracted with death and the cold of another night. Its body's life force ceased, but within the resting Seed below, the tiny creature's genetic soul waited expectantly for the light of a new world to come. ●

MOVING? If you want your subscription to *Asimov's* to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the zip codes for both, please!) to our subscription department; Box 5130, Harlan, IA 51593-5130.

For many years Koriba, the wise *mundumugu*, has watched over his people, and carefully weeded out every threat to paradise. Yet, he may find himself responsible for the most dangerous challenge of all.

Mike Resnick

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE

art: Jonathan and Lisa Hunt

There was a time when animals could speak.

Lions and zebras, elephants and leopards, birds and men all shared the earth. They labored side by side, they met and spoke of many things, they exchanged visits and gifts.

Then one day Ngai, who rules the universe from His throne atop Kirinyaga, which men now call Mount Kenya, summoned all of His creations to meet with Him.

"I have done everything I can to make life good for all my creatures," said Ngai. The assembled animals and men began to sing His praises, but Ngai held up His hand, and they immediately stopped.

"I have made life *too* good for you," He continued. "None among you has died for the past year."

"What is wrong with that?" asked the zebra.

"Just as you are constrained by your natures," said Ngai, "just as the elephant cannot fly and the impala cannot climb trees, so I cannot be dishonest. Since no one has died, I cannot feel compassion for you, and without compassion, I cannot water the savannah and the forest with my tears. And without water, the grasses and the trees will shrivel and die."

There was much moaning and wailing from the creatures, but again Ngai silenced them.

"I will tell you a story," He said, "and you must learn from it.

"Once there were two colonies of ants. One colony was very wise, and one colony was very foolish, and they lived next to each other. One day they received word that an aardvark, a creature that eats ants, was coming to their land. The foolish colony went about their business, hoping that the aardvark would ignore them and attack their neighbors. But the wise colony built a mound that could withstand even the efforts of an aardvark, and they gathered sugar and honey, and stockpiled it in the mound.

"When the aardvark reached the kingdom of the ants, he immediately attacked the wise ants, but the mound withstood his greatest efforts, and the ants within survived by eating their sugar and honey. Finally, after many fruitless days, the aardvark wandered over to the kingdom of the foolish ants, and dined well that evening."

Ngai fell silent, and none of His creatures dared ask Him to speak further. Instead, they returned to their homes and discussed His story, and made their preparations for the coming drought.

A year passed, and finally the men decided to sacrifice an innocent goat, and that very day Ngai's tears fell upon the parched and barren land. The next morning Ngai again summoned His creatures to the holy mountain.

"How have you fared during the past year?" He asked each of them.

"Very badly," moaned the elephant, who was very thin and weak. "We did as you instructed us, and built a mound, and gathered sugar and honey—but we grew hot and uncomfortable within the mound, and there is not enough sugar and honey in all the world to feed a family of elephants."

"We have fared even worse," wailed the lion, who was even thinner, "for lions cannot eat sugar and honey at all, but must have meat."

And so it went, as each animal poured out its misery. Finally Ngai turned to the man and asked him the same question.

"We have fared very well," replied the man. "We built a container for water, and filled it before the drought came, and we stockpiled enough grain to last us to this day."

"I am very proud of you," said Ngai. "Of all my creatures, only you understood my story."

"It is not fair!" protested the other animals. "We built mounds and saved sugar and honey, as you told us to!"

"What I told you was a parable," said Ngai, "and you have mistaken the facts of it for the truth that lay beneath. I gave you the power to think, but since you have not used it, I hereby take it away. And as a further punishment, you will no longer have the ability to speak, for creatures that do not think have nothing to say."

And from that day forth, only man, among all Ngai's creations, has had the power to think and speak, for only man can pierce through the facts to find the truth.

You think you know a person when you have worked with him and trained him and guided his thinking since he was a small boy. You think you can foresee his reactions to various situations. You think you know how his mind works.

And if the person in question has been chosen by you, selected from the mass of his companions and groomed for something special, as young Ndemi was selected and groomed by me to be my successor as the *mundumugu*—the witch doctor—to our terraformed world of Kirinyaga, the one thing you think above all else is that you possess his loyalty and his gratitude.

But even a *mundumugu* can be wrong.

I do not know exactly when or how it began. I had chosen Ndemi to be my assistant when he was still a *kehee*—an uncircumcised child—and I had worked diligently with him to prepare him for the position he would one day inherit from me. I chose him not for his boldness, though he feared nothing, nor for his enthusiasm, which was boundless, but rather for his intellect, for with the exception of one small girl, long since dead, he was by far the brightest of the children on Kirinyaga. And since we had emigrated to this world to create a Kikuyu paradise, far from the corrupt imitation of Europe that Kenya had become, it was imperative that the *mundumugu* be the wisest of men, for the *mundumugu* not only reads omens and casts spells, but is also the repository for the collected wisdom and culture of his tribe.

Day by day I added to Ndemi's limited storehouse of knowledge. I taught him how to make medicine from the bark and pods of the acacia tree, I showed him how to create the ointments that would ease the discomfort of the aged when the weather turned cold and wet, I made him memorize the hundred spells that were used to bless the scarecrows in the field. I told him a thousand parables, for the Kikuyu have a parable for every need and every occasion, and the wise *mundumugu* is the one who finds the right parable for each situation.

And finally, after he had served me faithfully for six long years, coming up my hill every morning, feeding my chickens and goats, lighting the fire in my *boma,* and filling my empty water gourds before his daily lessons began, I took him into my hut and showed him how my computer worked.

There are only four computers on all of Kirinyaga. The others belong to Koinnage, the paramount chief of our village, and to two chiefs of distant clans, but their computers can do nothing but send and receive messages. Only mine is tied into the data banks of the Eutopian Council, the ruling body that had given Kirinyaga its charter, for only the *mundumugu* has the strength and the vision to be exposed to European culture without becoming corrupted by it.

One of the primary purposes of my computer was to plot the orbital adjustments that would bring seasonal changes to Kirinyaga, so that the rains would come on schedule and the crops would flourish and the harvest would be successful. It was perhaps the *mundumugu*'s most important obligation to his people, since it assured their survival. I spent many long days teaching Ndemi all the many intricacies of the computer, until he knew its workings as well as I myself did, and could speak to it with perfect ease.

The morning that I first noticed the change in him began like any other. I awoke, wrapped my blanket around my withered shoulders, and walked painfully out of my hut to sit by my fire until the warming rays of the sun took the chill from the air. And, as always, there was no fire.

Ndemi came up the path to my hill a few minutes later.

"*Jambo,* Koriba," he said, greeting me with his usual smile.

"*Jambo,* Ndemi," I said. "How many times have I explained to you that I am an old man, and that I must sit by my fire until the air becomes warmer?"

"I am sorry, Koriba," he said. "But as I was leaving my father's *shamba,* I saw a hyena stalking one of our goats, and I had to drive it off." He held his spear up, as if that were proof of his statement.

I could not help but admire his ingenuity. It was perhaps the thousandth time he had been late, and never had he given the same excuse twice. Still, the situation was becoming intolerable, and when he finished his chores and the fire had warmed my bones and eased my pain, I told him to sit down opposite me.

"What is our lesson for today?" he asked as he squatted down.

"The lesson will come later," I said, finally letting my blanket fall from my shoulders as the first warm breeze of the day blew a fine cloud of dust past my face. "But first I will tell you a story."

He nodded, and stared intently at me as I began speaking.

"Once there was a Kikuyu chief," I said. "He had many admirable qualities. He was a mighty warrior, and in council his words carried great weight. But along with his many good qualities, he also had a flaw.

"One day he saw a maiden tilling the fields in her father's *shamba,* and he was smitten with her. He meant to tell her of his love the very next day, but as he set out to see her, his way was blocked by an elephant, and he retreated and waited until the elephant had passed. When he finally arrived at the maiden's *boma,* he discovered that a young warrior was paying her court. Nevertheless, she smiled at him when their eyes met, and, undiscouraged, he made up his mind to visit her the following day. This time a deadly snake blocked his way, and once again, when he arrived he found the maiden being courted by his rival. Once more she gave him an encouraging smile, and so he decided to come back a third time.

"On the morning of the third day, he lay on his blanket in his hut, and thought about all the many things he wanted to tell her to impress her with his ardor. By the time he had decided upon the best approach to win her favor, the sun was setting. He ran all the way from his *boma* to that of the maiden, only to find that his rival had just paid her father five cattle and thirty goats for her hand in marriage.

"He managed to get the maiden alone for a moment, and poured forth his litany of love.

" 'I love you too,' she answered, 'but although I waited for you each day, and hoped that you would come, you were always late.'

" 'I have excuses to offer,' he said. 'On the first day I encountered an elephant, and on the second day a killer snake was in my path.' He did not dare tell her the real reason he was late a third time, so he said, 'And today a leopard confronted me, and I had to kill it with my spear before I could continue on my way.'

" 'I am sorry,' said the maiden, 'but I am still promised to another.'

" 'Do you not believe me?' he demanded.

" 'It makes no difference whether you are telling the truth or not,' she replied. 'For whether the lion and the snake and the leopard are real or whether they are lies, the result is the same: you have lost your heart's desire because you were late.' "

I stopped and stared at Ndemi. "Do you understand the moral of my story?" I asked.

He nodded. "It does not matter to you whether a hyena was stalking my father's goat or not. All that matters is that I was late."

"That is correct," I said.

This is where such things had always ended, and then we would begin his lessons. But not this day.

"It is a foolish story," he said, looking out across the vast savannah.

"Oh?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because it begins with a lie."

"What lie?"

"The Kikuyu had no chiefs until the British created them," he answered.

"Who told you that?" I asked.

"I learned it from the box that glows with life," he said, finally meeting my gaze.

"My computer?"

He nodded again. "I have had many long discussions about the Kikuyu with it, and I have learned many things." He paused. "We did not even live in villages until the time of the Mau Mau, and then the British *made* us live together so that we could be more easily watched. And it was the British who created our tribal chiefs, so that they could rule us through them."

"That is true," I acknowledged. "But it is unimportant to my story."

"But your story was untrue with its first line," he said, "so why should the rest of it be true? Why did you not just say, 'Ndemi, if you are late again, I will not care whether your reason is true or false. I will punish you.' "

"Because it is important for you to understand *why* you must not be late."

"But the story is a lie. Everyone knows that it takes more than three days to court and purchase a wife. So it began with a lie and it ended with a lie."

"You are looking at the surface of things," I said, watching a small insect crawl over my foot and finally flicking it off. "The truth lies beneath."

"The truth is that you do not want me to be late. What has that to do with the elephant and the leopard, which were extinct before we came to Kirinyaga?"

"Listen to me, Ndemi," I said. "When you become the *mundumugu,* you will have to impart certain values, certain lessons, to your people—and you must do so in a way that they understand. This is especially true of the children, who are the clay that you will mold into the next generation of Kikuyu."

Ndemi was silent for a long moment. "I think you are wrong, Koriba," he said at last. "Not only will the people understand you if you speak plainly to them, but stories like the one you just told me are filled with lies that they will think are true simply because they come from the *mundumugu's* lips."

"*No!*" I said sharply. "We came to Kirinyaga to live as the Kikuyu lived before the Europeans tried to change us into that characterless tribe known as Kenyans. There is a poetry to my stories, a tradition to them. They reach out to our racial memory, of the way things were, and the way we hope to make them again." I paused to consider which path to follow, for never before had Ndemi so bluntly opposed my teachings. "You yourself used to beg me for stories, and of all the children you were the quickest to find the true meaning of them."

"I was younger then," he said.

"You were a Kikuyu then," I said.

"I am still a Kikuyu."

"You are a Kikuyu who has been exposed to European knowledge and European history," I said. "This is unavoidable, if you are to succeed me as the *mundumugu,* for we hold our charter at the whim of the Europeans, and you must be able to speak to them and work their machine. But your greatest challenge, as a Kikuyu and a *mundumugu,* is to avoid becoming corrupted by them."

"I do not *feel* corrupted," he said. "I have learned many things from the computer."

"So you have," I agreed, as a fish eagle circled lazily overhead and the breeze brought the smell of a nearby herd of wildebeest. "And you have forgotten many things."

"What have I forgotten?" he demanded, watching the fish eagle swoop down and grab a fish from the river. "You may test me and see how good my memory is."

"You have forgotten that the true value of a story is that the listener must bring something to it," I said. "I could simply order you not to be late, as you suggest—but the purpose of the story is to make you use your brain to understand *why* you should not be late." I paused. "You are also forgetting that the reason we do not try to become like Europeans is because we tried once before, and became only Kenyans."

He was silent for a long time. Finally he looked up at me.

"May we skip today's lesson?" he asked. "You have given me much to think about."

I nodded my acquiesence. "Come back tomorrow, and we will discuss your thoughts."

He stood up and walked down the long winding path that led from my hill to the village.

But though I waited for him until the sun was high in the sky the next day, he did not come back.

Just as it is good for fledgling birds to test their wings, it is good for young people to test *their* powers by questioning authority. I bore Ndemi no malice, but simply waited until the day that he returned, somewhat humbled, to resume his studies.

But the fact that I now had no assistant did not absolve me of my duties, and so each day I walked down to the village, and blessed the scarecrows, and took my place alongside Koinnage in the Council of Elders. I brought a new ointment for old Siboki's joints, which were causing him discomfort, and I sacrificed a goat so that Ngai would look with favor upon the pending marriage of Maruta with a man of another clan.

As always, when I made my rounds, I was followed everywhere by the village children, who begged me to stop what I was doing and tell them a story. For two days I was too busy, for a *mundumugu* has many tasks to perform, but on the morning of the third day I had some time to spare, and I gathered them around me in the shade of an acacia tree.

"What kind of story would you like to hear?" I asked.

"Tell us of the old days, when we still lived in Kenya," said a girl.

I smiled. They always asked for stories of Kenya—not that they knew where Kenya was, or what it meant to the Kikuyu. But when we lived in Kenya the lion and the rhinoceros and the elephant were not yet extinct, and they loved stories in which animals spoke and displayed greater wisdom than men, a wisdom that they themselves assimilated as I repeated the stories.

"Very well," I said. "I will tell you the story of the Foolish Lion."

They all sat or squatted down in a semi-circle, facing me with rapt attention, and I continued: "Once there was a foolish lion who lived on the slopes of Kirinyaga, the holy mountain, and because he was a foolish lion, he did not believe that Ngai had given the mountain to Gikuyu, the very first man. Then one morning . . ."

"That is wrong, Koriba," said one of the boys.

I focused my weak eyes on him, and saw that it was Mdutu, the son of Karenja.

"You have interrupted your *mundumugu,*" I noted harshly. "And, even worse, you have contradicted him. Why?"

"Ngai did not give Kirinyaga to Gikuyu," said Mdutu, getting to his feet.

"He most certainly did," I replied. "Kirinyaga belongs to the Kikuyu."

"That cannot be so," he persisted, "for Kirinyaga is not a Kikuyu name, but a Maasai name. *Kiri* means *mountain* in the language of Maa, and *nyaga* means *light.* Is it not more likely that Ngai gave the mountain to the Maasai, and that our warriors took it away from them?"

"How do you know what these words mean in the language of the Maasai?" I demanded. "That language is not known to anyone on Kirinyaga."

"Ndemi told us," said Mdutu.

"Well, Ndemi is wrong!" I shouted. "The truth has been passed on from Gikuyu through his nine daughters and his nine sons-in-law all the way down to me, and never has it varied. The Kikuyu are Ngai's chosen people. Just as He gave the spear and Kilimanjaro to the Maasai, He gave the digging-stick and Kirinyaga to us. Kirinyaga has always belonged to the Kikuyu, and it always will!"

"No, Koriba, you are wrong," said a soft, high-pitched voice, and I turned to face my new assailant. It was tiny Thimi, the daughter of Njomu, barely seven years old, who rose to contradict me.

"Ndemi told us that many years ago the Kikuyu sold Kirinyaga to a European named John Boyes for six goats, and it was the British government that made him return it to us."

"Who do you believe?" I demanded severely. "A young boy who has lived for only fifteen long rains, or your *mundumugu?*"

"I do not know," she answered with no sign of fear. "He tells us dates and places, and you speak of wise elephants and foolish lions. It is very hard to decide."

"Then perhaps instead of the story of the Foolish Lion," I said, "I will tell you the story of the Arrogant Boy."

"No, no, the lion!" shouted some of the children.

"Be quiet!" I snapped. "You will hear what *I* want to tell you!"

Their protests subsided, and Thimi sat down again.

"Once there was a bright young boy," I began.

"Was his name Ndemi?" asked Mdutu with a smile.

"His name was Legion," I answered. "Do not interrupt again, or I shall leave and there will be no more stories until the next rains."

The smile vanished from Mdutu's face, and he lowered his head.

"As I said, this was a very bright boy, and he worked on his father's *shamba,* herding the goats and cattle. And because he was a bright young boy, he was always thinking, and one day he thought of a way to make his chores easier. So he went to his father and said that he had had a dream, and in this dream they had built a wire enclosure with sharp barbs on the wire, to keep the cattle in and the hyenas out, and he was sure that if he were to build such an enclosure, he would no longer have to herd the cattle but would be free to do other things.

" 'I am glad to see that you are using your brain,' said the boy's father, 'but that idea has been tried before, by the Europeans. If you wish to free yourself from your duties, you must think of some other way.'

" 'But why?' said the boy. 'Just because the Europeans thought of it does not make it bad. After all, it must work for *them* or they would not use it.'

" 'That is true,' said his father. 'But what works for the Europeans does not necessarily work for the Kikuyu. Now do your chores, and keep thinking, and if you think hard enough I am sure you will come up with a better idea.'

"But along with being bright, the boy was also arrogant, and he refused to listen to his father, even though his father was older and wiser and more experienced. So he spent all his spare time attaching sharp little barbs to the wire, and when he was done he built an enclosure and put his father's cattle into it, sure that they could not get out and the hyenas could not find a way in. And when the enclosure was completed, he went to sleep for the night."

I paused and surveyed my audience. Most of them were staring raptly at me, trying to figure out what came next.

"He awoke to screams of anger from his father and wails of anguish from his mother and sisters, and ran out to see what had happened. He found all of his father's cattle dead. During the night the hyenas, whose jaws can crush a bone, had bitten through the posts to which the wire was attached, and the cattle, in their panic, ran into the wire and were held motionless by the barbs while the hyenas killed and ate them.

"The arrogant boy looked upon the carnage with puzzlement. 'How can this have happened?' he said. 'The Europeans have used this wire, and it never happened to them.'

" 'There are no hyenas in Europe,' said his father. 'I told you that we are different from Europeans, and that what works for them will not work for us, but you refused to listen, and now we must live our lives in poverty, for in a single night your arrogance cost me the cattle that it has taken me a lifetime to accumulate.' "

I fell silent and waited for a response.

"Is that all?" asked Mdutu at last.

"That is all."

"What did it mean?" asked another of the boys.

"You tell *me*," I said.

Nobody answered for a few moments. Then Balimi, Thimi's older sister, stood up.

"It means that only Europeans can use wire with barbs on it."

"No," I said. "You must not only listen, child, but *think*."

"It means that what works for the Europeans will not work for the Kikuyu," said Mdutu, "and that it is arrogant to believe that it will."

"That is correct," I said.

"That is *not* correct," said a familiar voice from behind me, and I turned to see Ndemi standing there. "All it means is that the boy was too foolish to cover the posts with the wire."

The children looked at him, and began nodding their heads in agreement.

"No!" I said firmly. "It means that we must reject all things European, including their ideas, for they were not meant for the Kikuyu."

"But why, Koriba?" asked Mdutu. "What is wrong with what Ndemi says?"

"Ndemi tells you only the facts of things," I said. "But because he, too, is an arrogant boy, he fails to see the truth."

"What truth does he fail to see?" persisted Mdutu.

"That if the wire enclosure were to work, then the next day the arrogant boy would borrow another idea from the Europeans, and yet another, until he had no Kikuyu ideas left, and he had turned his *shamba* into a European farm."

"Europe is an exporter of food," said Ndemi. "Kenya is an importer."

"What does that mean?" asked Thimi.

"It means that Ndemi has a little knowledge, and does not yet know that that is a dangerous thing," I answered.

"It means," responded Ndemi, "that European farms produce more than enough to feed their tribes, and Kenyan farms do not produce enough. And if that is the case, it means that some European ideas may be good for the Kikuyu."

"Perhaps you should wear shoes like the Europeans," I said angrily, "since you have decided to become one."

He shook his head. "I am a Kikuyu, not a European. But I do not wish to be an ignorant Kikuyu. How can we remain true to what we were, when your fables hide what we were from us?"

"No," I said. "They *reveal* it."

"I am sorry, Koriba," said Ndemi, "for you are a great *mundumugu* and I respect you above all men, but in this matter you are wrong." He paused and stared at me. "Why did you never tell us that the only time in our history the Kikuyu were united under the leadership of a single king, the king was a white man named John Boyes?"

The children gasped in amazement.

"If we do not know how it happened," continued Ndemi, "how can we prevent it from happening again? You tell us stories of our wars with the Maasai, and they are wonderful tales of courage and victory—but according to the computer, we lost every war we ever fought against them. Shouldn't we know that, so if the Maasai ever come to Kirinyaga, we are not deluded into fighting them because of the fables we have heard?"

"Koriba, is that true?" asked Mdutu. "Was our only king a European?"

"Did we never defeat the Maasai?" asked another of the children.

"Leave us for a moment," I said, "and then I will answer you."

The children reluctantly got up and walked away until they were out of earshot, then stood and stared at Ndemi and myself.

"Why have you done this?" I said to Ndemi. "You will destroy their pride in being Kikuyu!"

"I am not less proud for knowing the truth," said Ndemi. "Why should they be?"

"The stories I tell them are designed to make them distrust European ways, and to make them happy they are Kikuyu," I explained, trying to control my temper. "You will undermine the confidence they must have if Kirinyaga is to remain our Utopia."

"Most of us have never seen a European," answered Ndemi. "When I was younger, I used to dream about them, and in my dreams they had claws like a lion and shook the earth like an elephant when they walked. How does that prepare us for the day that we actually meet with them?"

"You will never meet them on Kirinyaga," I said. "And the purpose of my stories is to *keep* us on Kirinyaga." I paused. "Once before we had never seen Europeans, and we were so taken by their machines and their medicines and their religions that we tried to become Europeans ourselves, and succeeded only in becoming something other than Kikuyu. That must never happen again."

"But isn't it less likely to happen if you tell the children the truth?" persisted Ndemi.

"I *do* tell them the truth!" I said. "It is *you* who are confusing them with facts—facts that you got from European historians and a European computer."

"Are the facts wrong?"

"That is not the issue, Ndemi," I said. "These are *children*. They must learn as children do—as you yourself did."

"And after the circumcision rituals, when they become adults, will you tell them the facts then?"

That sentence was as close to rebellion as he had ever come—indeed, as *anyone* on Kirinyaga had ever come. Never had I been more fond of a young man than I was of Ndemi—not even of my own son, who had chosen to remain in Kenya. Ndemi was bright, he was bold, and it was hardly unusual for one of his age to question authority. Therefore, I decided to make another attempt to reason with him, rather than risk a permanent rift in our relationship.

"You are still the brightest young man on Kirinyaga," I said truthfully, "so I will pose you a question, and I will expect an honest answer. You seek after history, and I seek after truth. Which do you suppose is the more important?"

He frowned. "They are the same," he answered. "History *is* truth."

"No," I replied. "History is a compilation of facts and events, which is subject to constant reinterpretation. It begins with truth, and evolves into fable. My stories begin with fable and evolve into truth."

"If you are right," he said thoughtfully, "then your stories are more important than history."

"Very well, then," I said, hoping that the matter was closed.

"But," he added, "I am not sure that you are right. I will have to think more about it."

"Do that," I said. "You are an intelligent boy. You will come to the right conclusion."

Ndemi turned and began walking off in the direction of his family's *shamba*. The children rushed back as soon as he was out of sight, and once more squatted in the tight semi-circle.

"Have you an answer to my question, Koriba?" asked Mdutu.

"I cannot recall your question," I said.

"Was our only king a white man?"

"Yes."

"How could that be?"

I considered my response for a long moment.

"I will answer that by telling you the story of the little Kikuyu girl who became, very briefly, the queen of all the elephants," I said.

"What has that to do with the white man who became our king?" persisted Mdutu.

"Listen carefully," I instructed him, "for when I am done, I shall ask you many questions about my story, and before we are through, you will have the answer to your own question."

He leaned forward attentively, and I began reciting my fable.

I returned to my *boma* to take the noon meal. After I had finished it, I decided to take a nap during the heat of the day, for I am an old man and it had been a long, wearing morning. I let my goats and chickens loose on my hillside, secure in the knowledge that no one would take them away since they each carried the *mundumugu's* mark. I had just spread my sleeping blanket out beneath the branches of my acacia tree when I saw two figures at the foot of my hill.

At first I thought they were two village boys, looking for cattle that had strayed from their pastures, but when the figures began walking up the slopes of my hill I was finally able to focus my eyes on them. The larger was Shima, Ndemi's mother, and the smaller was a goat that she led by a rope that she had tied around its neck.

Finally she reached my *boma,* somewhat out of breath, for the goat was unused to the rope and constantly pulled against it, and opened the gate.

"*Jambo,* Shima," I said, as she entered the *boma.* "Why have you brought your goat to my hill? You know that only my own goats may graze here."

"It is a gift for you, Koriba," she replied.

"For me?" I said. "But I have done you no service in exchange for it."

"You can, though. You can take Ndemi back. He is a good boy, Koriba."

"But—"

"He will never be late again," she promised. "He truly did save our goat from a hyena. He would never lie to his *mundumugu.* He is young, but he can become a great *mundumugu* someday. I know he can, if you will just teach him. You are a wise man, Koriba, and you have made a wise choice in Ndemi. I do not know why you have banished him, but if you will just take him back he will never misbehave again. He wants only to become a great *mundumugu* like yourself. Though of course," she added hastily, "he could never be as great as you."

"Will you finally let me speak?" I asked irritably.

"Certainly, Koriba."

"I did not cast Ndemi out. He left of his own volition."

Her eyes widened. "*He* left *you?*"

"He is young, and rebellion is part of youth."

"So is foolishness!" she exclaimed furiously. "He has *always* been foolish. *And* late! He was even two weeks late being born when I carried him! He is always thinking, instead of doing his chores. For the longest time I thought we had been cursed, but then you made him your assistant, and I was to become the mother of the *mundumugu*—and now he has ruined everything!"

She let go of the rope, and the goat wandered around my *boma* as she began beating her breasts with her fists.

"Why am *I* so cursed?" she demanded. "Why does Ngai give me a fool for a son, and then stir my hopes by sending him to you, and then curse me doubly by returning him, almost a man and unable to perform any of the chores on our *shamba?* What will become of him? Who will accept a bride-price from such a fool? He will be late to plant our seed and late to harvest it, he will be late to choose a bride and late to make the payment on her, and he will end up living with the unmarried men at the edge of the forest and begging for food. With my luck he will even be late to die!" She paused for breath, then began wailing again, and finally screamed: "Why does Ngai hate me so?"

"Calm yourself, Shima," I said.

"It is easy for *you* to say!" she sobbed. "You have not lost all hope for your future."

"My future is of very limited duration," I said. "It is Kirinyaga's future that concerns me."

"See?" she said, wailing and beating her breasts again. "See? I am the mother of the boy who will destroy Kirinyaga!"

"I did not say that."

"What has he done, Koriba?" she said. "Tell me, and I will have his father and brothers beat him until he behaves."

"Beating him is not the solution," I said. "He is young, and he rebels against my authority. It is the way of things. Before long he will realize that he is wrong."

"I will explain to him all that he can lose, and he will know that he should never disagree with you, and he will come back."

"You might suggest it," I encouraged her. "I am an old man, and I have much left to teach him."

"I will do as you say, Koriba," she promised.

"Good," I said. "Now go back to your *shamba* and speak to Ndemi, for I have other things to do."

It was not until I awoke from my nap and returned to the village to sit at the Council of Elders that I realized just how *many* things I had to do.

Our daily business is always conducted in late afternoon, when the heat of the day has passed, at the *boma* of Koinnage, the paramount chief. One by one the Elders place their mats in a semi-circle and sit on them, with my place being at Koinnage's right hand. The *boma* is cleared of all women, children, and animals, and when the last of us has arrived, Koinnage calls us into session. He announces what problems are to be considered, and then I ask Ngai to guide our judgment and allow us to come to just decisions.

On this particular day, two of the villagers had asked the Council of Elders to determine the ownership of a calf that was born to a cow they jointly owned; Sebana wanted permission to divorce his youngest wife, who had now been barren for three years; and Kijo's three sons were unhappy with the way his estate had been divided among them.

Koinnage consulted with me in low whispers after each petition had been heard, and took my advice, as always. The calf went to the man who had fed the cow during her pregnancy, with the understanding that the other man should own the next calf. Sebana was told that he could divorce his wife, but would not receive the bride price back, and he elected to keep her. Kijo's sons were told that they could accept the division as it was, or if two of them agreed, I would place three colored stones in a gourd, and they could each withdraw a stone and own the *shamba* that it represented. Since each faced the possibility of ending up with the smallest *shamba,* only one brother voted for our solution, as I had foreseen, and the petition was dismissed.

At this point, Koinnage's senior wife, Wambu, would usually appear with a large gourd of *pombe,* and we would drink it and then return to our *bomas,* but this day Wambu did not come, and Koinnage turned nervously to me.

"There is one thing more, Koriba," he said.

"Oh?"

He nodded, and I could see the muscles in his face tensing as he worked up the courage to confront his *mundumugu.*

"You have told us that Ngai handed the burning spear to Jomo Kenyatta, that he might create Mau Mau and drive the Europeans from Kenya."

"That is true," I said.

"Is it?" he replied. "I have been told that he himself married a European woman, that Mau Mau did *not* succeed in driving the Europeans from the holy mountain, and that Jomo Kenyatta was not even his real name—that he was actually born with the European name Johnstone." He stared at me, half-accusing, half-terrified of arousing my wrath. "What have you to say to this, Koriba?"

I met his gaze and held it for a long time, until he finally dropped his eyes. Then, one by one, I looked coldly at each member of the Council.

"So you prefer to believe a foolish boy to your own *mundumugu?*" I demanded.

"We do not believe the boy, but the computer," said Karenja.

"And have you spoken to the computer yourselves?"

"No," said Koinnage. "That is another thing we must discuss. Ndemi tells me that your computer speaks to him and tells him many things, while *my* computer can do nothing but send messages to the other chiefs."

"It is a *mundumugu*'s tool, not to be used by other men," I replied.

"Why?" asked Karenja. "It knows many things that we do not know. We could learn much from it."

"You *have* learned much from it," I said. "It speaks to me, and I speak to you."

"But it also speaks to Ndemi," continued Karenja, "and if it can speak to a boy barely past circumcision age, why can it not speak directly to the elders of the village?"

I turned to Karenja and held my two hands in front of me, palms up. "In my left hand is the meat of an impala that I killed today," I said. "In my right hand is the meat of an impala that I killed five days ago and left to sit in the sun. It is covered with ants, worms crawl through it, and it stinks." I paused. "Which of the two pieces of meat will you eat?"

"The meat in your left hand," he answered.

"But both pieces of meat came from the same herd of impala," I pointed out. "Both animals were equally fat and healthy when they died."

"But the meat in your right hand is rotten," he said.

"That is true," I agreed. "And just as there can be good and bad meat, so there can be good and bad facts. The facts Ndemi has related to you come from books written by the Europeans, and facts can mean different things to them than they mean to us."

I paused while they considered what I had said, and then continued. "A European may look upon the savannah and envision a city, while a Kikuyu may look at the same savannah and see a *shamba*. A European may look at an elephant and see ivory trinkets, while a Kikuyu may look at the same elephant and see food for his village, or destruction for his crops. And yet they are looking at the same land, and the same animal.

"Now," I said, once again looking at each of them in turn, "I have been to school in Europe, and in America, and only I, of all the men and women on Kirinyaga, have lived among the white man. And I tell you that only I, your *mundumugu,* am capable of separating the good facts from the bad facts. It was a mistake to allow Ndemi to speak with my computer; I will not allow it again, until I have given him more of my wisdom."

I had thought my statement would put an end to the matter, but as I looked around I saw signs of discomfort, as if they wished to argue with me but lacked the courage. Finally Koinnage leaned forward and, without looking directly at me, said, "Do you not see what you are saying, Koriba? If the *mundumugu* can make a mistake by allowing a young boy to speak with his computer, can he not also make a mistake by not allowing the Elders to speak to it?"

I shook my head. "It is a mistake to allow *any* Kikuyu except the *mundumugu* to speak to it."

"But there is much that we can learn from it," persisted Koinnage.

"What?" I asked bluntly.

He shrugged helplessly. "If I knew, then I would already have learned it."

"How many times must I repeat this to you: there is nothing to be learned from the Europeans. The more you try to become like them, the less you remain Kikuyu. This is *our* Utopia, a *Kikuyu* Utopia. We must fight to preserve it."

"And yet," said Karenja, "even the word Utopia is European, is it not?"

"You heard that from Ndemi, too?" I asked without hiding the annoyance from my voice.

He nodded his head. "Yes."

"Utopia is just a word," I said. "It is the *idea* that counts."

"If the Kikuyu have no word for it and the Europeans do, perhaps it is a European idea," said Karenja. "And if we have built our world upon a European idea, perhaps there are other European ideas that we can also use."

I looked at their faces, and realized, for perhaps the first time, that most of the original Elders of Kirinyaga had died. Old Siboki remained, and I could tell by his face that he found European ideas even more abhorrent than I myself did, and there were two or three others, but this was a new generation of Elders, men who had come to maturity on Kirinyaga and could not remember the reasons we had fought so hard to come here.

"If you want to become black Europeans, go back to Kenya!" I snapped in disgust. "It is filled with them!"

"We are not black Europeans," said Karenja, refusing to let the matter drop. "We are Kikuyu who think it is possible that not all European ideas are harmful."

"Any idea that changes us is harmful," I said.

"Why?" asked Koinnage, his courage to oppose me growing as he realized that many of the Elders supported him. "Where is it written that a Utopia cannot grow and change? If that were the case, we would have ceased to be a Utopia the day the first baby was born on Kirinyaga."

"There are as many Utopias as there are races," I said. "None among you would argue that a Kikuyu Utopia is the same as a Maasai Utopia or a Samburu Utopia. By the same token, a Kikuyu Utopia cannot be a European Utopia. The closer you come to the one, the farther you move from the other."

They had no answer to that, and I got to my feet.

"I am your *mundumugu,*" I said. "I have never misled you. You have always trusted my judgment in the past. You must trust in it in this instance."

As I began walking out of the *boma,* I heard Karenja's voice behind me.

"If you were to die tomorrow, Ndemi would become our *mundumugu.* Are you saying we should trust his judgment as we trust yours?"

I turned to face him. "Ndemi is very young and inexperienced. You, as the elders of the village, would have to use your wisdom to decide whether or not what he says is correct."

"A bird that has been caged all its life cannot fly," said Karenja, "just as a flower that has been kept from the sun will not blossom."

"What is your point?" I asked.

"Shouldn't we begin using our wisdom now, lest we forget how when Ndemi has become the *mundumugu?*"

This time it was I who had no answer, so I turned on my heel and began the long walk back to my hill.

For five days I fetched my own water and made my own fires, and then Ndemi returned, as I had known he would.

I was sitting in my *boma,* idly watching a herd of gazelles grazing across the river, when he trudged up the path to my hill, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"*Jambo,* Ndemi," I said. "It is good to see you again."

"*Jambo,* Koriba," he replied.

"And how was your vacation?" I asked, but there is no Swahili word for *vacation* so I used the English term and the humor and sarcasm were lost on him.

"My father urged me to come back," he said, bending over to pet one of my goats, and I saw the welts on his back that constituted his "urging."

"I am glad to have you back, Ndemi," I said. "We have become like father and son, and it pains me when we argue, as I am sure it pains you."

"It *does* pain me," he admitted. "I do not like to disagree with you, Koriba."

"We have both made mistakes," I continued. "You argued with your *mundumugu,* and I allowed you access to all that information before you were mature enough to know what to do with it. We are both intelligent enough to learn from our mistakes. You are still my chosen successor. It shall be as if it never happened."

"But it *did* happen, Koriba," he said.

"We shall pretend it did not."

"I do not think I can do that," said Ndemi unhappily, protecting his eyes as a sudden wind blew dust across the *boma.* "I learned many things when I spoke to the computer. How can I unlearn them?"

"If you cannot unlearn them, then you will have to ignore them until you are older," I said. "*I* am your teacher. The computer is just a tool. You will use it to bring the rains, and to send an occasional message to Maintenance, and that is all."

A black kite swooped down and made off with a scrap of my morning meal that had fallen beside the embers of my fire. I watched it while I waited for Ndemi to speak.

"You appear troubled," I said, when it became apparent that he would not speak first. "Tell me what bothers you."

"It was you who taught me to think, Koriba," he said as various emotions played across his handsome young face. "Would you have me stop thinking now, just because I think differently than you do?"

"Of course I do not want you to stop thinking, Ndemi," I said, not without sympathy, for I understood the forces at war within him. "What good would a *mundumugu* be if he could not think? But just as there are right and wrong ways to throw a spear, there are right and wrong ways to think. I wish only to see you take the path of true wisdom."

"It will be greater wisdom if I come upon it myself," he said. "I must learn as many facts as I can, so that I can properly decide which are helpful and which are harmful."

"You are still too young," I said. "You must trust me until you are older, and better able to make those decisions."

"The facts will not change."

"No, but *you* will."

"But how can I know that change is for the good?" he asked. "What if you are wrong, and by listening to you until I become like you, I will be wrong too?"

"If you think I am wrong, why have you come back?"

"To listen, and decide," he said. "And to speak to the computer again."

"I cannot permit that," I said. "You have already caused great mischief among the tribe. Because of you, they are questioning everything I say."

"There is a reason for that."

"Perhaps you will tell me what it is?" I said, trying to keep the sarcasm from my voice, for I truly loved this boy and wished to win him back to my side.

"I have listened to your stories for many years now, Koriba," he said, "and I believe that I can use *your* method to show you the reason."

I nodded my head and waited for him to continue.

"This should be called the story of Ndemi," he said, "but because I am pretending to be Koriba, I shall call it the story of the Unborn Lion."

I plucked an insect from my cheek and rolled it between my fingers until the carapace cracked. "I am listening."

"Once there was an unborn lion who was very anxious to see the world," began Ndemi. "He spent much time talking about it to his unborn brothers. 'The world will be a wonderful place,' he assured them. 'The sun will always be shining, and the plains will be filled with fat, lazy impala, and all other animals will bow before us, for there shall be no animal mightier than us.'

"His brothers urged him to stay where he was. 'Why are you so anxious to be born?' they asked him. 'Here it is warm and safe, and we never hunger. Who knows what awaits us in the world?'

"But the unborn lion would hear none of it, and one night, while his mother and brethren slept, he stole out into the world. He could not see, so he nudged his mother and said, 'Where is the sun?' and she told him that the sun vanishes every evening, leaving the world cold and dark. 'At least when it comes back tomorrow, it will shine on fat lazy impala that we can catch and eat,' he said, trying to console himself.

"But his mother said, 'There are no impala here, for they have migrated with the rains to the far side of the world. All that is left for us to eat is the buffalo. Their flesh is tough and tasteless, and they kill as many of us as we kill of them.'

" 'If my stomach is empty, at least my spirit will be full,' said the newly born lion, 'for all other animals will look upon us with fear and envy.'

" 'You are very foolish, even for a newly born cub,' said his mother. " 'The leopard and the hyena and the eagle look upon you not as an object of envy, but rather as a tasty meal.'

" 'But all of them will fear me when I am fully-grown,' said the newly born lion.

" 'The rhinoceros will gore you with his horn,' said his mother, 'and the elephant will toss you high into the trees with his trunk. Even the black mamba will not step aside for you, and will kill you if you try to approach it.'

"The mother continued her list of all the animals that would neither fear nor envy the lion when he grew up, and finally he told her to speak no more.

" 'I have made a terrible mistake by being born,' he said. 'The world is not as I pictured it, and I will rejoin my brothers where they are warm and safe and comfortable.'

"But his mother merely smiled at him. 'Oh, no,' she said, not without compassion. 'Once you are born, whether it is of your own choosing or mine, you cannot ever go back to being an unborn lion. Here you are, and here you shall stay.' "

Ndemi looked at me, his story finished.

"It is a very wise story," I said. "I could not have done better myself. I knew the day I first made you my pupil that you would make a fine *mundumugu*."

"You still do not understand," he said unhappily.

"I understand the story perfectly," I replied.

"But it is a lie," said Ndemi. "I told it only to show you how easy it is to make up such lies."

"It is not easy at all," I corrected him. "It is an art, mastered only by a few—and now that I see that you have mastered it, it would be doubly hurtful to lose you."

"Art or not, it is a lie," he repeated. "If a child heard and believed it, he would be sure that lions could speak, and that babies can be born whenever they chose to be." He paused. "It would have been much simpler to tell you that once I have obtained knowledge, whether it was freely given or not, I cannot empty my mind and give it back. Lions have nothing to do with that." He paused for a long moment. "Furthermore, I do not *want* to give my knowledge back. I want to learn more things, not forget those that I already know."

"You must not say that, Ndemi," I urged him. "Especially now that I see that my teachings have taken root, and that your abilities as a creator of fables will someday surpass my own. You can be a great *mundumugu* if you will just allow me to guide you."

"I love and respect you as I do my father, Koriba," he replied. "I have always listened and tried to learn from you, and I will continue to do so for as long as you will permit me. But you are not the only source of knowledge. I also wish to learn what your computer can teach me."

"When I decide you are ready."

"I am ready now."

"You are not."

His face reflected an enormous inner battle, and I could only watch until it was resolved. Finally he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I am sorry, Koriba, but I cannot continue to tell lies when there are truths to be learned." He laid a hand on my shoulder. *"Kwaheri, mwalimu." Good-bye, my teacher.*

"What will you do?"

"I cannot work on my father's *shamba,*" he said, "not after all that I have learned. Nor do I wish to live in isolation with the bachelors at the edge of the forest."

"What is left for you?" I asked.

"I shall walk to that area of Kirinyaga called Haven, and await the next Maintenance ship. I will go to Kenya and learn to read and write, and when I am ready, I will study to become an historian. And when I am a good enough historian, I will return to Kirinyaga and teach what I have learned."

"I am powerless to stop you from leaving," I said, "for the right to emigrate is guaranteed to all our citizens by our charter. But if you return, know that despite what we have been to one another, I will oppose you."

"I do not wish to be your enemy, Koriba," he said.

"I do not wish to have you as an enemy," I replied. "The bond between us has been a strong one."

"But the things I have learned are too important to my people."

"They are *my* people too," I pointed out, "and I have led them to this point by always doing what I think is best for them."

"Perhaps it is time for *them* to choose what is best."

"They are incapable of making that choice," I said.

"If they are incapable of making that choice, it is only because you have hoarded knowledge to which they have as much right as you do."

"Think very carefully before you do this thing," I said. "Despite my love for you, if you do anything to harm Kirinyaga, I will crush you like an insect."

He smiled sadly. "For six years I have asked you to teach me how to turn my enemies into insects so that I may crush them. Is this how I am finally to learn?"

I could not help but return his smile. I had an urge to stand up and throw my arms around him and hug him, but such behavior is unacceptable in a *mundumugu*, so I merely looked at him for a long moment and then said, "*Kwaheri,* Ndemi. You were the best of them."

"I had the best teacher," he replied.

And with that, he turned and began the long walk toward Haven.

The problems caused by Ndemi did not end with his departure.

Njoro dug a borehole near his hut, and when I explained that the Kikuyu did not dig boreholes but carried their water from the river, he replied that surely *this* borehole must be acceptable, for the idea came not from the Europeans but rather the Tswana people far to the south of Kenya.

I ordered the boreholes to be filled in. When Koinnage argued that there were crocodiles in the river and that he would not risk the lives of our women simply to maintain what he felt was a useless tradition, I had to threaten him with a powerful *thahu,* or curse—that of impotency—before he agreed.

Then there was Kidogo, who has named his firstborn Jomo, after Jomo Kenyatta, the Burning Spear. One day he announced that the boy was henceforth to be known as Johnstone, and I had to threaten him with banishment to another village before he relented. But even as he gave in, Mbura changed his own name to Johnstone and moved to a distant village even before I could order it.

Shima continued to tell anyone who would listen that I had forced Ndemi to leave Kirinyaga because he was occasionally late for his lessons, and Koinnage kept requesting a computer that was the equal of my own.

Finally, young Mdutu created his own version of a barbed-wire enclosure for his father's cattle, using woven grasses and thorns, making sure he wrapped them around the fenceposts. I had it torn down, and thereafter he always walked away when the other children circled around me to hear a story.

I began to feel like the Dutch boy in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale. As quickly as I put my finger in the dike to staunch the flow of European ideas, they would break through in another place.

And then a strange thing happened. Certain ideas that were *not* European, that Ndemi could not possibly have transmitted to the members of the village, began cropping up on their own.

Kibo, the youngest of Koinnage's three wives, rendered the fat from a dead warthog and began burning it at night, creating Kirinyaga's first lamp. Ngobe, whose arm was not strong enough to throw a spear with any accuracy, devised a very primitive bow and arrow, the first Kikuyu ever to use such a weapon. Karenja created a wooden plow, so that his ox could drag it through the fields while his wives simply guided it, and soon all the other villagers were improvising plows and strangely shaped digging tools. Indeed, alien ideas that had been dormant since the creation of Kirinyaga were now springing forth on all fronts. Ndemi's words had opened a Pandora's box, and I did not know how to close it.

I spent many long days sitting alone on my hill, staring down at the village and wondering if a Utopia can evolve and still remain a Utopia.

And the answer was always the same: Yes, but it will not be the *same* Utopia, and it was my sacred duty to keep Kirinyaga a Kikuyu Utopia.

When I was convinced that Ndemi was not going to return, I began going down to the village each day, trying to decide which of the children was the brightest and most forceful, for it would take both brilliance and force to deflect the alien ideas which were infecting our world and turning it into something it was never meant to be.

I spoke only to the boys, for no female may be a *mundumugu*. Some, like Mdutu, had already been corrupted by listening to Ndemi—but those who had *not* been corrupted by Ndemi were even more hopeless, for a mind cannot open and close at will, and those who were unmoved by what he had to say were not bright enough for the tasks a *mundumugu* must perform.

I expanded my search to other villages, convinced that somewhere on Kirinyaga I would find the boy I sought, a boy who grasped the difference between facts, which merely informed, and parables, which not only informed but *instructed*. I needed a Homer, a Jesus, a Shakespeare, someone who could touch men's souls and gently guide them down the path that must be taken.

But the more I searched, the more I came to the realization that a Utopia does not lend itself to such tellers of tales. Kirinyaga seemed divided into two totally separate groups: those who were content with their lives and had no need to think, and those whose every thought led them farther and farther from the society we had labored to build. The unimaginative would never be capable of creating parables, and the imaginative would create their own parables, parables that would not reaffirm a belief in Kirinyaga and a distrust of alien ideas.

After some months I was finally forced to concede that, for whatever reason, there were no potential *mundumugus* waiting to be found and groomed. I began wondering if Ndemi had been truly unique, or if he would have eventually rejected my teachings even without exposure to the European influence of the computer. Was it possible that a true Utopia could not outlast the generation that founded it, that it was the nature of man to reject the values of the society into which he is born, even when those values are sacred?

Or was it just conceivable that Kirinyaga had *never* been a Utopia, that somehow we had deluded ourselves into believing that we could go back to a way of life that had forever vanished?

I considered that possibility for a long time, but eventually I rejected it, for if it were true, then the only logical conclusion was that it had vanished because the Europeans' values were more pleasing to Ngai than our own, and this I knew to be false.

No, if there was a truth anywhere in the universe, it was that Kirinyaga was exactly as it was meant to be—and if Ngai felt obligated to test us by presenting us with these heresies, that would make our ultimate victory over the lies of the Europeans all the more sweet. If minds were worth anything, they were worth fighting for, and when Ndemi returned, armed with his facts and his data and his numbers, he would find me waiting for him.

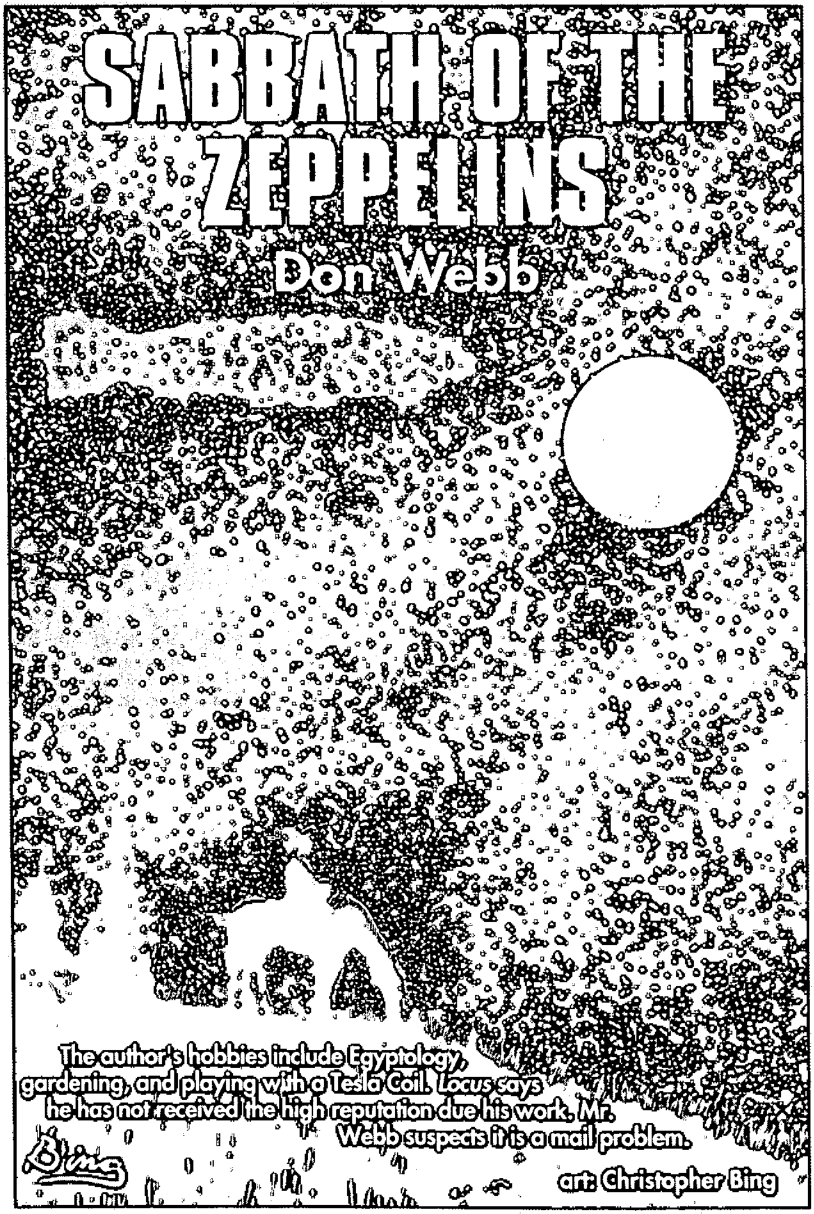
It would be a lonely battle, I thought as I carried my empty water gourds down to the river, but having given His people a second chance to build their Utopia, Ngai would not allow us to fail. Let Ndemi tempt our people with his history and his passionless statistics. Ngai had His own weapon, the oldest and truest weapon He possessed, the weapon that had created Kirinyaga and kept it pure and intact despite all the many challenges it had encountered.

I looked into the water and studied the weapon critically. It appeared old and frail, but I could also see hidden reservoirs of strength, for although the future appeared bleak, it could not fail as long as it was used in Ngai's service. It stared back at me, bold and unblinking, secure in the rightness of its cause.

It was the face of Koriba, last storyteller among the Kikuyu, who stood ready to battle once again for the soul of his people. ●

SABBATH OF THE ZEPPELINS

Don Webb



The author's hobbies include Egyptology, gardening, and playing with a Tesla Coil. *Locus* says he has not received the high reputation due his work. Mr. Webb suspects it is a mail problem.

art: Christopher Bing

Malcolm MacKenzie was what we called a galvanized Yankee, which is to say that he had been a Confederate caught by the North and then freed on the condition that he would soldier against the Indians on the Western frontier. That's as good an introduction as any. It tells you that he was a hard-luck case, and that he was in his 50s during the Phantom Airship Flap of 1897. And being an ex-Confederate, when he met a being that was pretty near God—and found out that He was a black man—he was pretty broke up about it.

The flap itself had started during Thanksgiving Week, 1896. According to an article in the San Francisco *Call*, an electrician named J. A. Heron had been contacted by airship pilots. They took him to a deserted field north of San Francisco, and he performed repairs on their craft. As a reward for his labor, he was taken on a 4,400-mile journey to the Hawaiian Islands. The trip took thirty-four hours. He described the vessel as resembling a great silver cigar, which caused many of us to take the cigars we were smoking out of our mouths and examine them closely. A week later, the *Call* reported that Mr. Heron's wife reported that Mr. Heron had been in bed asleep during the supposed journey. We all laughed at our foolishness, until Rosa, who tells the Tarot cards for a dime, said that there might be more to that story than meets the eye. None of us asked her what she meant, because she charged a nickel to answer questions. Hamlet MacKenzie may have asked her. He was nickeling and diming his daddy to death, but that comes in later. Instead, we moved out onto the porch and watched the skies. We all wanted to see that airship. Who *wouldn't* want to be able to bring a cold breeze to the backs of his fellows around the campfire by saying, "I have seen strange shadows in the sky"?

Malcolm MacKenzie had no time for airship watching. His wife had up and died on him two years ago. His two daughters, Jeffalina Davis MacKenzie and Roberta Elee MacKenzie, were gettin' near marriageable age, and the boys in the bunkhouse were gettin' a mite too sociable. And then there was his son Hamlet, who was named by his mother, and thus avoided a Civil War handle. Had Hamlet been born anywhere or anywhen else, his curiosity and drive would have made him into a fine philosopher, scientist, or fictioneer. But he hadn't been born anywhere else. So Hamlet spent handfuls of dimes with Rosa, learning the arcane lore of the gypsy peoples—and much else besides. Hamlet had himself a personal telegraph station run out to the ranch. That's right, a personal station, with wires run along the fence posts all the way from town. He spent hours getting and receiving messages from other operators. He said he was a node in the worldnet, but nobody rightly understood what he was talking about. Most folks thought Hamlet was loco. In fact, we'd often debate it right on the porch of the Amarillo Hotel—was Hamlet loco?

The next sighting of the airship was by a Texan, and therefore of unquestioned veracity. In the *Daily Texarkanian*, April 25, 1897, Judge Lawrence A. Byrne reported that he had seen the airship at the McKinney bayou. The ship landed and its pilots showed him through. The judge explained "about the machinery being made out of aluminum and the gas to raise and lower the monster was pumped into an aluminum tank when the ship was to be raised and let out when the ship was to be lowered." Hamlet MacKenzie, who took damn near every paper in Texas, read the article to us hisself. And you can *bet* that there was a lot of watching the sky that night!

Hamlet rode off to sample some of his sweetheart's larruping good pecan pie. Hamlet was a sweet lad, a late bloomer, no doubt due to his mother's tender influence. He was between hay and grass—or as you might say, boyhood and manhood. He still had not put away boyish things like his telegraph and his sense of wonder—and many of us hoped that he never would.

Meanwhile, there was trouble on MacKenzie ranch. While Hamlet was off pirootin' with his sweetheart, four of Malcolm's best cows—all of 'em with calves—had come down with the staggers. Malcolm stayed up all night with them, nursing them—drilling holes in their horns and pouring in boiled milk.

One of his hired hands rode off the next morning, saying that if a herd gets the staggers, it'll get dead. Might as well start looking for work now.

Bodies swelling up in the sun. Bursting. Turkey buzzards and the little orange-and-yellow flowers of a Panhandle spring. Creek running low and Hamlet looking pale from so much time at his telegraph. He was very concerned about what the Turks were doing to the Armenians. Genocide was still a new word then.

Malcolm's arthritis began to act up, and there seemed to always be bills waiting for him in town.

Hamlet rode into town on his sorrel gelding to pick up some bills, some salve for the cattle, and his copy of the *Argus-Leader* of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Seems that two farmhands, Adolph Winkle and John Hulle, had signed affidavits stating that the airship had landed two miles outside of town to repair some electrical apparatus on board. The boys had talked to the occupants, who said that they had flown over a hundred miles in thirty minutes and would "mail a report to the government when Cuba is declared free." He waited around mournfully, like he was about to spend some money at Rosa's table, but thought better of it, and rode off.

His sweetheart, Emily Boadicea Jones, strolled by a tad later and asked if any of us had seen Hamlet. We told her he had just rode off, and she looked near to tears. Hadn't seen him much lately, she said.

"It's like this, son—what with the cattle dying, I just can't afford to keep you in luxuries. I admire this worldnet concept you've thought up, and I know you're vitally interested in the situations in Cuba and Armenia, but, son, from now on you're gonna have to be like the rest of us and just wait on your news from word of mouth."

"Will I have to cut off my studies with Rosa, too?"

"Son, I promised your mother I'd take care of you. I don't know for the life of me why you hang around that old heathen with her terror cards and spells. It just ain't . . . just ain't *white,* son. I'll let you have a dime a week, and for the love of God, don't tell me how you spend it."

•

We all heard of Hamlet's plight. He weren't the kind of man to keep his troubles to hisself.

"If you ask me, that boy had been spending too much of his daddy's money. This is liable to make a man out of him," said Sam the barkeep, drawn to an easy consensus like iron filings to a magnet.

Hamlet didn't ever hear the remark, because he was in the curtained-off area with Rosa—that dimly lit chamber where the course of the future was made plain to you for a small fee. One of the boys walked over and put his ear to the filthy red satin drapes, listening to their exchange, and manfully trying not to choke from the combined smells of stale patchouli and the fermenting brown spittle in the gaboons.

". . . and that's the story, Rosa. Well, I have these two nickels."

"So you can ask two questions."

"Rosa, I've given you a passel full of nickels in the past, can't I have a few freebies?"

"I've told you before, if you don't pay for it you won't have any respect for it. Mysteries may be cheap, but they ain't free."

"But I've got to know. I have to know things."

"Your father has buried a coffee can full of silver dollars in the stall of his favorite horse."

"That's against emergency. So he can take care of his payroll."

"You live to know things. Would Faust have hesitated to steal it?"

"Who's Faust?"

"Do you want to pay for that question?"

"No."

After a beat he spoke again, sliding a nickel across the table.

"Rosa, this airship thing. What's the real key to what's going on here?"

"The real key is in the first sighting. Not in the man's experience but in what his wife said."

"What will bring me closest to the airship—where do I start?"

"The first step is obtaining a Sears and Roebuck catalog. Go, I can tell you no more."

As he rode back to the ranch, he saw the telegraph company clipping his wire.

Hamlet's papers continued to come, and, as he'd stopped riding into town daily, we took to reading them, then folding them up nicely again. We noted some things about the airship.

*In Jasserand, Texas, it had brilliant lights, and the farmer who encountered the crew by night was told it ran on "condensed electricity."

*In Harrisburg, Arkansas, the airship had a gun capable of firing 63,000 times a minute. The crew told "Ex-Senator Harris," when they awakened him at one A.M., that the ship was held aloft by anti-gravitation wire. They were planning to go to Armenia or Mars soon.

*In Holton, Michigan, the airship took an "honest citizen" for a ride, after which he talked of nothing but aerial navigation and the great revelry of the night.

*The airship was seen at night by many men. It was seen in Pine Lake, Michigan; Eldora, Iowa; Dallas, Texas; Waterloo, Iowa; Sisterville, Virginia. It was on its way to Greece, Cuba, Armenia, Mars, or New York. It had bright lights. It needed electrical repairs, water, beef, trout, bluestone, or a corkscrew. It was 200 feet long, 800 feet long, half a mile long.

And the occupants wore goggles, smoked glass, or mirror shades.

Jeffalina Davis MacKenzie rode into town on a buckboard driven by Joseph Carpenter, foreman at the MacKenzie ranch. She bought two gingham dresses, and spent the afternoon with her best friend, Emily Jones. They rode south as the sun began to set—whereas the ranch lay to the *north*. When Emily closed up her dress shop, she stopped by the Amarillo Hotel for a plate of black-eyed peas and ham hock. We questioned her. She said that Jeffalina had rode off with Joseph, never to return. Did she know any particulars? Two things. One, Hamlet was stalking around the ranch with a wild look in his eye and his shirt done up wrong. Two, wherever she went to, she was going to get a better name than *Jeffalina*.

A week went by without Hamlet showing up at all. The Sears catalog arrived in the mail, and we went over its contents with a fine-tooth comb. We didn't find nothing. Maybe Rosa had just been spoofing. But that didn't seem like our Rosa. Many a man rubbed a nickel between his thumb and forefinger, but none of us asked. Rosa had learned her trade from the Python, skin-shedding oracle of Apollo. She knew the striptease of mystery. Show a little bit, but a very little bit, and leave them wanting more. All art, perhaps, comes down to the hootchy-kootchy dance of Salome. You could lose all your nickels trying to force the feather boa from her shoulder. So we didn't ask. We were grown men, mature men, men with families.

We needed our nickels.

The most spectacular sighting of the airship occurred in Vernon, Kansas. Mr. Alexander Hamilton, a well-established farmer whose veracity was guaranteed by the sheriff, mayor, and other established citizens, revealed (in *The Farmers Advocate*) the dark doings of the airship. It passed over his farm late at night. "It was brilliantly lighted within, and everything was clearly visible." Occupied by six of the strangest beings he had ever seen, Mr. Hamilton could not understand their language. Their intent seemed clear enough. As the great craft whished over the farm, a three-year-old heifer began to bawl. Mr. Hamilton ran to its aid and found a thick red cord about its neck. The cord was tangled in his barbed wire and went on up to the brightly lit ship. He tried to free the terrified animal, but his barlow pen knife just skittered across the hard surface. The fence wire began to twang and pop from the posts. So Mr. Alexander Hamilton stepped over to it and cut the wire away from the red cord. At once the heifer began to rise in the air, and as the airship floated out of sight, it screamed and screamed in terror.

When we read this account, we grew cold in sickness and fear. Yet the sight of the cow rising (in our mind's eye) redoubled our curiosity. Someone said, *Hamlet* ought to know about this. Somebody else volunteered to take *The Farmers Advocate* and the Sears catalog out to Hamlet. There was an unspoken desire for all the things that came afterward. We *wanted* him to do what he did—so we are just as guilty.

Silver dollars have a special rich sound when they fall on a wooden table, banging one against the other and the wood. The sight or the sound or the smell of money is always a powerful message. It's a strong enough message that it will cut through all others in a crowded, noisy room. All heads turn. But *this* sound was particularly poignant. We knew that Hamlet had dug up his father's savings. It would be awhile before old Malcolm knew, but *we* knew. And when that rich clang of money came from behind Rosa's curtains, Emily Jones put down her fork. She got real pale, because a lot of *her* future was in that money too. She left the dining room, just kind of drifted out, and was never the same afterward.

"Take it," Hamlet said.

We couldn't hear what followed, as though Rosa had used her witchcraft to put a wall of silence around her place. Well, Hamlet had paid dearly for her information. After half an hour, Hamlet emerged from behind the drapes with an ashen expression and the Sears catalog under his arm. He got some paper from the desk clerk and straightaway wrote out an order. He left it with the clerk, along with some money for its postage, and to pay for the item when it arrived.

We questioned the clerk after Hamlet's departure. The item would cost $2.30. Hamlet said it would be a small box.

We moved out onto the porch to whittle and watch the skies. Somebody opined that we were too excited by this thing—after all, there had been cigar-shaped balloons in Europe. True, everyone agreed (for we were a well-informed bunch), but those had been crude affairs. They didn't whish or swoop, they didn't have powerful searchlights or massive guns. When their inventors tried to fly them, it was by day in front of huge crowds. This mystery came forth by night. Someone—or some*thing*, remembering the words of Mr. Hamilton—had a vastly superior technology to our own.

"You spent all of my money—everything—on *this?* A two-ounce jar of thornapple salve?"

"It's more than a jar of thornapple salve, Dad, it's the key to the airship mystery."

" 'It's the key to the airship mystery,' " Malcolm mocked, "It's the key to my losing the ranch! It's the key to me being landless and poor in my old age! It's the key to losing every single thing your mother and I built! I thought there was *some* home in you, some glimmer of responsibility. You stole from your own father! You think I just planted that jar and money grew in it? Did your witch tell you that? But even worse, you *stole* it."

"I had to know, and as soon as I know fully, I'll write a book about it and we'll have lots of money."

"Son, them starry notions ain't gonna put bread on the table, but that still don't address the question of you being a thief. You're a thief and everybody knows it. A thief, and a consorter with the dark-skinned gypsy witch. You've brought a blot to our name. I can't think of you as a MacKenzie no more! Take this."

Malcolm drew a wad of blue backs—Confederate money he carried for cigarette papers—and slapped it down on the kitchen table. "Take these, that's all you're worth to me! Put it in your saddle bag. I'll give you a horse and tack. Then ride the hell off my ranch. If I ever find out you're using the family name, I'll hunt you down and kill you."

Hamlet reached for the blue glass jar of thornapple salve, but Malcolm picked up a table knife.

Malcolm said, "I'll keep this. It was bought with my money. It's mine."

Hamlet saw something he had never seen—the terrible power of the father. He went to his room.

The boys were out fence-mending, and Roberta had rode out to take them supper. Hamlet was alone in the big house with his father, and he heard something he had never heard before. His father was sobbing, which was like a bone in his throat. Sometimes he caught the words. "First Jeffalina and now him, what have I done wrong? I tried. I really *tried,* Maudie. I tried to be a good father." Hamlet's saddle bag was small, so filling it up was easy. He had to leave behind his clippings and telegrams, browning paper assortments of anomalies and miracles, wars and rumors of wars. He left aside the chunk of meteorite, and the shells from a sea he'd never seen.

He went to say goodbye, but he saw tears on his father's face, and, in the presence of this mystery, he was silent. He went out the back way, and all his father heard was the closing of the door.

With the falling of night, he rode to Emily's. She rented the small house her parents used to own. She kept a few hens and had a garden. He knocked very softly.

We'll draw a veil over that scene. Protective loving feelings overcame judgment, and we always thought of Emily as a used woman after that night.

Malcolm had been very still sitting in his chair—slumped over the kitchen table. Sobs had ceased to rock his body, but he was tired from the sobbing. Just tired, and he ached. He rose his head up slowly, and saw that it was dark. Roberta should be back by now. He thought of going to her bedroom, kissing her brow. His one good child. But suddenly fear possessed him that she might not be there. That she might be out with the boys, seduced to performing wild acts. He could believe any monstrous thing of his offspring now, and he wasn't ready for the possible revelations that could come from opening that door.

He picked up the jar of salve. He could smell its strong medicine smell. He thought that he ought to throw it out. "For arthritis, rheumatism, gout, bursitis, chilblains, pains in the joints, male and female complaints, lack of energy. Good for man or beast." Ah, he thought, there is balm in Gilead.

He took off his shirt and wiped off his arms and upper body with a scrap of red towel that served as a kitchen rag. He opened the jar and dipped three fingers into the snot-green, cold unguent. It was thick, jellylike, but it spread like fire on his flesh. It found tiny cuts that he didn't know of, and made them shout out their presence. With numbing ice-heat it soothed sore muscles. It seemed to go into his lungs and out his nostrils like smoke. He could feel it in his blood and on the inside of his eye sockets. It had a rich alien smell—something like the sharp smell of a creosote bush after a rain, something like desert sage, something like the incense he had smelled once in a Catholic church in Vicksburg. He plopped down in the chair, his eyes closed, giving himself entirely to the alien scent. It was the only time in years, perhaps the only time since making love to Maudie, that he had given himself totally to sensation. He closed his eyes and breathed in, breathed out. Felt the heat. Breathed in, breathed out.

He must have slept a short time, before he heard the rustling in the grass. Somebody was out by the well. It couldn't be the boys, they were sleeping halfway across the ranch. Hamlet wouldn't have come back—he was honorable about some things; there was *some* of his pappy in him. Malcolm smiled in the dark, realizing that he wasn't a total failure.

Rustle.

He lifted rather than pushed his chair back and got up real quiet. He went for his daddy's rifle over the fireplace. Just buckshot. He put his piece on too, as he went to the door, in case he needed more than buckshot. He was glad he always oiled his door well when he opened it soundlessly.

There were three of them at the well. He didn't begrudge anybody water so he tilted his rifle skyward and walked toward them.

He said, "Howdy."

Instantly everything was brighter than day. A harsh white light that burned purple into his eyes. Malcolm tried to look up—to see where the light was coming from—and was momentarily blinded for his trouble. He could hear music and laughter above him. Wild and stirring music. One of the figures spoke to him, a man. Could almost begin to see him through the thick light.

"We needed some water for our steam turbines, mister. Hope you don't mind." The man had a slightly buzzing voice, as though his mouth wasn't shaped right.

"No, I—I don't mind at all."

"We can repay you for the water."

Malcolm had never thought of selling water to anybody in his whole life. Water was free. Heck, they could've gone another mile and got it from the creek. But if they *wanted* to pay. Someone laughed above. What the hell was going on here? Why did that light seem so *thick?*

Another figure spoke. A woman.

"We can repay you with a ride in the airship."

Now Hamlet had said something about that. Write a book, make a fortune. He would get Hamlet back and they would have it made. Maybe the boy *wasn't* crazy.

He asked, "Who are you people, anyway?"

The man who spoke before answered, "Never mind my name—call me Smith. We just need to know if you'll take us up on our offer."

"Yeah. There's nothing I'd like better."

"Step aside."

Malcolm stepped out of the blinding light. There was a whir of machinery. Something was being let down. Sounds of chain and winch.

It looked like a giant's coal scuttle. The figures in goggles stepped into it, laying down their buckets of water. Malcolm climbed in. Inside the shaft of light, he could see four stout chains that pyramided into one chain that began to lift the scuttle from the ground.

It rose a long time.

It stopped.

But the light was too intense to see anything.

"Try one of these." Some woman had approached the scuttle and handed Malcolm a pair of goggles. He put them on and the pain stopped immediately, and he could see.

The sides of the scuttle swung open, and the three he had ascended with picked up their buckets and headed across a vast hall. It was fashioned of a silver-gray metal like aluminum, and its arched ceiling was covered in crystal chandeliers. Far more exotic than the twelve-crystal fob chandelier in his parlor. The chandeliers derived their flashing fiery rainbows from arc lamps, and the crystal swung to and fro, vibrated by the movement of the airship and from the great dance taking place therein.

For the floor of the hall was filled with all manner of man and woman. Clothed and unclothed in the dress of many periods. There were Negroes and Indians and Chinese. Some of the men were clearly excited by the naked (or the scantily clothed) women, and they would grab or be grabbed by their partners and engage in strange acts (some of which Malcolm did not know existed—but which looked to be intensely pleasurable). And among the men and women there were *others*. Others almost—but not quite—human. They were hard to look at straight on. In fact, if Malcolm really stared at them he heard a buzzing in his ears and they would disappear with a kind of pop. But he could see them out of the corners of his eyes. Their noses long and flexible, their teeth dull blue, their tiny horns. There were musicians dancing among the great throng. Players of horns and viols, bone flutes and ebon wood flutes, bagpipes and hautboys. There were rattlers of rattles, drummers of drums, chimers of chimes, and twangers of long stringed instruments Malcolm could not identify.

There were those launching whistling rockets, exploding strings of fireworks, and lighting flower-fires of every color.

A beautiful naked negress danced before Malcolm and plopped a candy in his open mouth. He would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that it was his grandmother's fudge.

The music grew so loud and wild that it got inside him and ran around the inside of his skin, and he found himself among them—cavorting and cutting capers as never before. He danced, and he sang all kinds of wild, crazy songs. Dirty songs and nursery songs and songs he'd heard Indians sang. Finally he was singing wild songs in a language he didn't know, but expected to know at any minute.

Then there were the viands passed from guest to guest. Sweet smoked meat and spicy cakes, and unnamable fruits of an unbelievable succulentness.

He drank from crystal goblets and vials of mother-of-pearl, drank of the coldest spring water and of the fiercest liquors. Some of these ran down his chest and other dancers licked them away. Once one of the others so cleaned him. He looked down upon her and she brushed his face gently with her wing.

A Presence sat on a throne at one end of the hall. There was a veil of dark fire surrounding him. Whenever there was a pause in the great dance, the dancers would look toward the throne with anticipation.

As Malcolm leaned forward to seize a cake from a silver tray held by a golden-haired midget, a voice rang out:

"MALCOLM Alexander MacKenzie, come FORTH."

It was not volume, but Presence that made the voice so.

The crowd parted for Malcolm as he approached the throne. They looked at him with respect—not with worship or fear, but with respect. He had seen that same look in Hamlet's eyes when Hamlet spoke to him. But he had never seen so much of it as here—and, sadly, had never realized its name till now.

The dark fire didn't throw off much heat, but it concealed whoever sat behind it.

"I wasn't expecting you, Malcolm A. MacKenzie. I was expecting your son—but no matter, you are here and I will receive you. It's a little loud here. Let's go below decks."

Instantly they were in a quiet dark room. The dark fire gave off as much light as a dying campfire.

Two great windows formed the back walls of the diamond-shaped room. Malcolm could see towers with rings of lights illuminating a city and casting ripples of light into a long river.

The Presence spoke to him, "Beautiful, aren't they? They open up the night. That is the city of Austin. They put those 'Moonlight Towers' in two years ago. They're powered by the hydroelectric plant at that dam. Only two cities with electric lights now, Austin and London. But someday all the world will have them. Light to open up the night. I haven't been this excited in millennia."

"You some kind of inventor?"

"I am every kind of inventor, but you're my best invention. You might say I'm the shaper of your consciousness."

Malcolm seemed a little at a loss. The other continued.

"Oh, I wish your son had come. I could've shown him the engines of this craft or talked philosophy with him or let him steal my pot of gold and my singing harp. You don't even know that I made a joke."

"My boy wants to know the secret of the airship."

"Electrical power, diesel engines, helium. Aluminum. Rotors. Calculating machines. I've told everyone."

"Everyone? But I thought it was a secret."

"People remember what they want to remember. They would learn more if they studied the people I move to find their way here."

"Don't you just pick up and bring them?"

"The salve does that. The witches' ointment. Broom grease. Really one of my best inventions, except that it screws up the memory. Selling it through the Sears and Roebuck catalog was a stroke of genius."

The airship had begun to move away from Austin. The Moonlight Towers seemed to move into one another, becoming one light, and then a star, and then naught.

"Where are you taking me?"

"On the Wild Ride, Malcolm. I wanted to check on Galveston before dawn."

"I've never seen the ocean. I was born in Georgia, but I've never seen it. My brother sent some shells to my boy."

"Curiosity is strong in him. I can feel that. He's as brave as you are, and curious. He's the kind of man who will make the twentieth century."

The darkness below was moving rapidly now. Lakes and ponds threw the stars and moon back at the airship. Malcolm saw the glowing cone of a charcoal-maker's mound burning out of control. He could see birds—some sort of white bird—that seemed to glow in the moonlight. And then there were strands of cotton, which he realized were clouds. They were above the clouds! Those were clouds down there. And he couldn't even feel it, couldn't even feel them moving.

"Will we really see the ocean?"

The voice was gentle for the first time, "Yes. Remember, remember the ocean."

"Have you been at this inventing for a long time?"

"In Egypt such nights were called Typhonia. By your standards it's been a long time."

"Why?"

"For a bet. To prove myself right."

"Yeah, I know how that is. I once bet Bedford Derleth I could walk twenty-five miles in one day. And I did. My feet were sore for weeks. That pride can be a heavy thing."

The Presence laughed.

Malcolm asked, "This guy you bet, is he keeping track of all the stuff you do?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen Him for awhile."

The airship was passing over plains of coarse grass. There were farms and marshes full of moonlight. And then.

The ocean.

It was everything he'd dreamt of. Everything people said. And more and different. He watched the lines of white, foam markers of waves, and beyond that there was movement without the great lines—just isolated flecks of white. And it went on forever.

The airship turned around over an island. There were fine brick buildings in the moonlight—and tall-masted ships tied up round the island, and a bridge as pretty as a picture of the new Eiffel Tower, bringing two ribbons of railroad steel to the island.

"Say, eh, Mister, what did you bet?"

"I bet that people could learn to think for themselves."

The airship had turned landwards.

"That's some bet. I want my son to think for himself, but when he starts to, it scares me."

"Diversity brings more than it takes away. That's why I hate slavery. You lose diversity."

"I'm really glad to see the ocean. Could you show me your face so I know who did all this?"

"No one's asked Me that for a while." The Presence stepped through the veil of dark fire. There was never skin so black as this, as black as pure ebon. There were never eyes so full of stars, nor leather wings so frightening. But above all, here was the most beautiful face—even with its marks of pride and anger—that Malcolm A. MacKenzie had ever seen.

Now, theologically, Malcolm wasn't prepared for this instant. He thought what he was seeing was God. He dropped to his knees.

Instantly, all beauty changed to anger. The creature seized Malcolm with its taloned hand. It burned into the flesh like a branding iron. It hauled Malcolm to his feet.

"NEVER. NEVER KNEEL. Stand on your own feet!"

The dark fire surrounded the creature again, and Malcolm thought he heard the creature say, "It's part of the bet." But the words were so soft he wasn't sure.

Malcolm woke in his kitchen. Dawn light was reddening the windowpanes.

A dream, he thought, it was a dream.

Then he moved, and almost passed out from the charred places on his shoulder.

He got dressed, which wasn't easy, since every movement brought a whimper from his throat. He threw the rest of the salve on the banked coals of the fireplace, where it burned nastily.

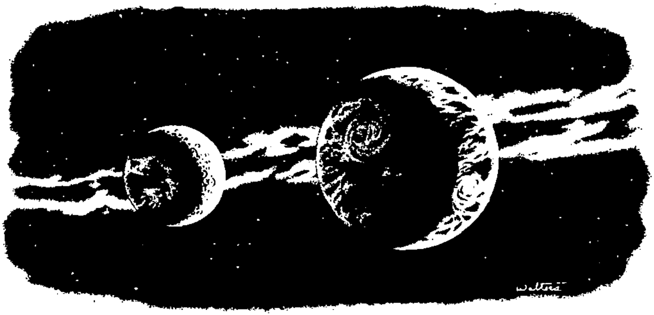
Roberta found him drinking coffee cups full of whiskey. He wouldn't let her go for the doctor, but she did ride into town and find Hamlet. Hamlet came back to the ranch. Malcolm wouldn't talk about his experience, but Hamlet had a good idea.

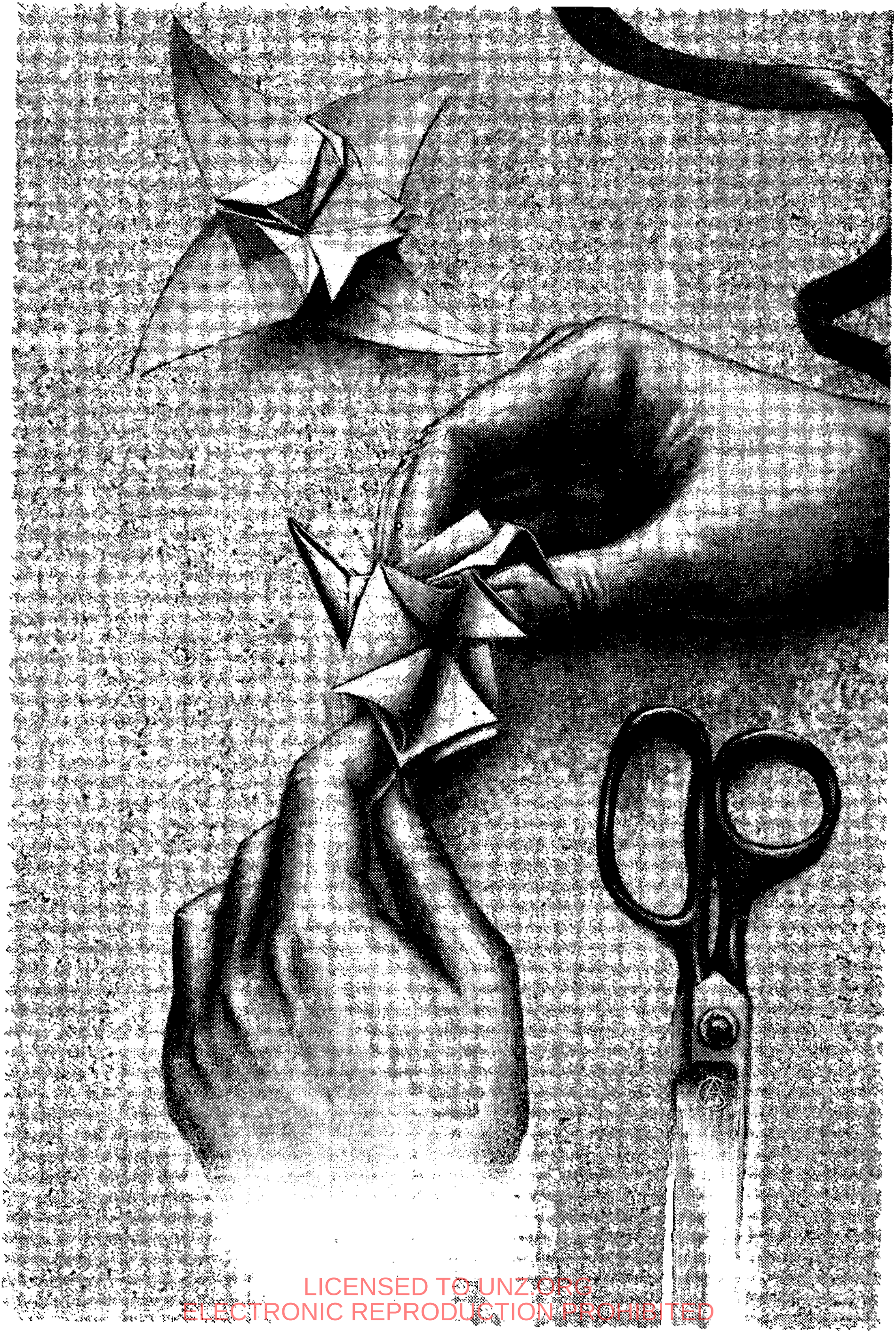
In fact, Malcolm talked less and less as the years went by. He'd just saddle up his horse and ride to a high spot on the ranch and watch the stars, but folks never knew why.

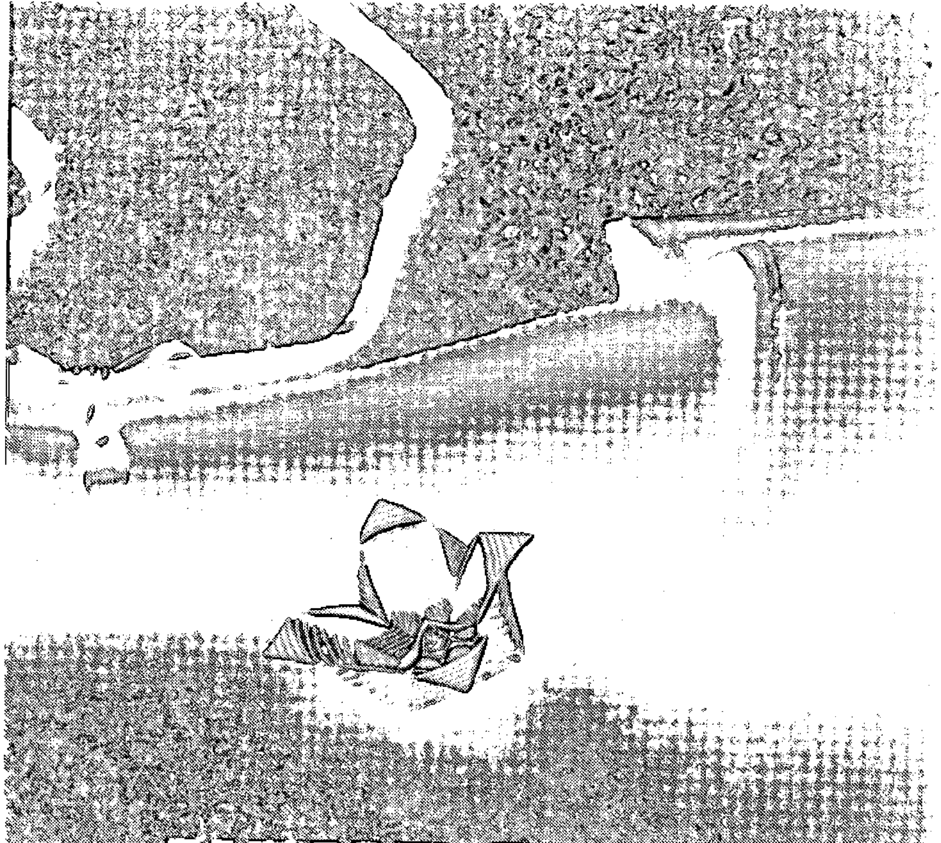
The ranch prospered under Hamlet's management. In fact, it became something of a model of modern ranching techniques. Hamlet married Rosa, and she got her share of the ranch—which was all she ever wanted anyway. Some evil-eyed gossips said that the ranch had begun to prosper because Rosa had taken her spell off it.

As for Emily Jones, the town got the railroad the next year, and Emily rode off with the conductor, far beyond the boundaries of this tale. ●

—for John A. Keel







NEKROPOLIS

Maureen F. McHugh

In a distant and exotic future, a lowly housekeeper finds that even the most sheltered life can lead to risk and turmoil. Tor will publish the hardcover edition of Ms. McHugh's next novel, *Half the Day Is Night*, in October.

art: Alan M. Clark

How I came to be jessed. Well, like most people who are jessed, I was sold. I was twenty-one, and I was sold three times in one day, one right after another. First to a dealer who looked at my teeth and in my ears and had me scanned for augmentation; then to a second dealer where I sat in the back office drinking tea and talking with a gap-toothed boy who was supposed to be sold to a restaurant owner as a clerk; and finally that afternoon to the restaurant owner. The restaurant owner couldn't really have wanted the boy anyway, since the position was for his wife's side of the house.

I have been with my present owner since I was twenty-one. That was pretty long ago, I am twenty-six now. I was a good student, I got good marks, so I was purchased to oversee cleaning and supplies. This is much better than if I were a pretty girl and had to rely on looks. Then I would be used up in a few years. I'm rather plain, with a square jaw and unexceptional hair.

I liked my owner, liked my work. But now I would like to go to him and ask him to sell me.

"Diyet," he would say, taking my hand in his fatherly way, "Aren't you happy here?"

"Mardin-salah," I would answer, my eyes demurely on my toes. "You are like a father and I have been only too happy with you." Which is true even beyond being jessed. I don't think I would mind being part of Mardin's household even if I were unbound. Mostly Mardin pays no attention to me, which is how I prefer things. I like my work and my room. I like being jessed. It makes things simpler.

All would be fine if it were not for the new one.

I have no problems with AI. I don't mind the cleaning machine, poor thing, and as head of the women's household, I work with the household intelligence all the time. I may have had a simple, rather conservative upbringing, but I have come to be pretty comfortable with AI. The Holy Injunction doesn't mean that all AI is abomination. But AI should not be biologically constructed. AI should not be made in the image of humanity.

It thinks of itself. It has a name. It has gender.

It thinks it is male. And it's head of the men's side of the house, so it thinks we should work together.

It looks human male, has curly black hair and soft honey-colored skin. It flirts, looking at me sideways out of black, vulnerable gazelle eyes. Smiling at me with a smile which is not in the slightest bit vulnerable. "Come on, Diyet," it says, "we work together. We should be friends. We're both young, we can help each other in our work."

I do not bother to answer.

It smiles wickedly (although I know it is not wicked, it is just something grown and programmed. Soulless. I am not so conservative that I condemn cloning, but it is not a clone. It is a biological construct.). "Diyet," it says, "I think you are too pure. A Holy Sister."

"Don't sound foolish," I say.

"You need someone to tease you," it says, "you are so solemn. Tell me, is it because you are jessed?"

I do not know how much it knows, does it understand the process of jessing? "The Mashahana says that just as a jessed hawk is tamed, not tied, so shall the servant be bound by affection and duty, not chains."

"Does the Mashahana say it should not make you sad, Diyet?"

Can something not human blaspheme?

In the morning, Mardin calls me into his office. He offers me tea, translucent green and fragrant with flowers, which I sip, regarding my sandals and my pink toenails. He pages through my morning report, nodding, making pleased noises, occasionally slurping his tea. Afternoons and evenings, Mardin is at his restaurant. I have never been in it, but I understand that it is an exceptional place.

"What will you do this afternoon?" he asks.

It is my afternoon free. "My childhood friend, Kari, and I will go shopping, Mardin-salah."

"Ah," he says, smiling. "Spend a little extra silver," he says, "buy yourself earrings or something. I'll see the credit is available."

I murmur my thanks. He makes a show of paging through the report, and the sheets of paper whisper against each other.

"And what do you think of the harni, Akhmim? Is he working out?"

"I do not spend so much time with it, Mardin-salah. Its work is with the men's household."

"You are an old-fashioned girl, Diyet, that is good." Mardin-salah holds the report a little farther away, striking a very dignified pose in his reading. "Harni have social training, but no practice. The merchant recommended to me that I send it out to talk and meet with people as much as possible."

I wriggle my toes. He has stopped referring to it as if it were a person, which is good, but now he is going to try to send it with me. "I must meet my friend Kari at her home in the Nekropolis, Mardin-salah. Perhaps it is not a good place to take a harni." The Nekropolis is a conservative place.

Mardin-salah waves his hand airily. "Everything is in order, Diyet," he says, referring to the reports in front of him. "My wife has asked that you use a little more scent with the linens."

His wife thinks I am too cheap. Mardin-salah likes to think that he runs a frugal household. He does not, money hemorrhages from this house, silver pours from the walls and runs down the street into the pockets of everyone in this city. She wanted to buy *it,* I am certain. She is like that, she enjoys toys. Surrounds herself with things, projects still more things, until it is difficult to know what is in her quarters and what comes out of the walls. She probably saw it and had to have it, the way she had to have the little long-haired dog with the overbite, her little lion dog—nasty little thing that Fadina has to feed and bathe. Fadina is her body servant.

I hope Mardin will forget about the harni, but he doesn't. There is no respite. I must take it with me.

It is waiting for me after lunch. I am wearing lavender and pale yellow, with long yellow ribbons tied around my wrists.

"Jessed, Diyet," it says. "You wouldn't have me along if you weren't."

Of course I am jessed. I always wear ribbons when I go out. "The Mashahana says ribbons are a symbol of devotion to the Most Holy, as well as an earthly master."

It runs its long fingers through its curly hair, shakes its head, and its golden earring dances. Artifice, the pretense of humanity. Although I guess even a harni's hair gets in its eyes. "Why would you choose to be jessed?" it asks.

"You wouldn't understand," I say, "come along."

It never takes offense, never worries about offending. "Can you tell the difference between the compulsion and your own feelings?" it asks.

"Jessing only heightens my natural tendencies," I say.

"Then why are you so sad?" it asks.

"I am not sad!" I snap.

"I am sorry," it says immediately. Blessedly, it is silent while we go down to the tube. I point which direction we are going and it nods and follows. I get a seat on the tube and it stands in front of me. It glances down at me. Smiles. I fancy it looks as if it feels pity for me. (Artifice. Does the cleaning machine feel sorry for anyone? Even itself? Does the household intelligence? The body chemistry of a harni may be based on humanity, but it is carefully calculated.)

It wears a white shirt. I study my toenails.

The tube lets us off at the edge of the Nekropolis, at the Moussin of the White Falcon. Mourners in white stand outside the Moussin, and I can faintly smell the incense on the hot air. The sun is blinding after the cool dark tube, and the Moussin and the mourners' robes are painful to look at. They are talking and laughing. Often, mourners haven't seen each other for years, family is spread all across the country.

The harni looks around, as curious as a child or a jackdaw. The Nekropolis is all white stone, the doorways open onto blackness.

I grew up in the Nekropolis. We didn't have running water, it was delivered every day in a big lorritank and people would go out and buy it by the *karn,* and we lived in three adjoining mausoleums instead of a flat, but other than that, it was a pretty normal childhood. I have a sister and two brothers. My mother sells paper funeral decorations, so the Nekropolis is a very good place for her to live, no long tube rides every day. The part we lived in was old. Next to my bed were the dates for the person buried behind the wall, 3673 to 3744. All of the family was dead hundreds of years ago, no one ever came to this death house to lay out paper flowers and birds. In fact, when I was four, we bought the rights to this place from an old woman whose family had lived here a long time before us.

Our house always smelled of cinnamon and the perfume my mother used on her paper flowers and birds. In the middle death-house, there were funeral arrangements everywhere, and when we ate we would clear a space on the floor and sit surrounded. When I was a little girl, I learned the different uses of papers; how my mother used translucent tissue for carnations, stiff satiny brittle paper for roses, and strong paper with a grain like linen for arrogant falcons. As children, we all smelled of perfume, and when I stayed the night with my friend Kari, she would wrap her arms around my waist and whisper in my neck, "You smell so good."

I am not waiting for the harni. It has to follow, it has no credit for the tube ride. If it isn't paying attention and gets lost, it will have to walk home.

When I glance back a block and a half later, it is following me, its long curly hair wild about its shoulders, its face turned artlessly toward the sun. Does it enjoy the feeling of sunlight on skin? Probably, that is a basic biological pleasure. It must enjoy things like eating.

Kari comes out, running on light feet. "Diyet!" she calls. She still lives across from my mother but now she has a husband and a pretty two-year-old daughter, a chubby toddler with black hair and clear skin the color of amber. Tariam, the little girl, stands clinging to the doorway, her thumb in her mouth. Kari grabs my wrists and her bracelets jingle. "Come out of the heat!" She glances past me and says, "Who is this?"

The harni stands there, one hand on his hip, smiling.

Kari drops my wrists and pulls a little at her rose colored veil. She smiles, thinking of course that I have brought a handsome young man with me.

"It is a harni," I say and laugh, shrill and nervous. "Mardin-salah asked me to bring him with me."

"A harni?" she asks, her voice doubtful.

I wave my hand. "You know the mistress, always wanting toys. He is in charge of the men's household." "He," I say. I meant "it." "It is in charge." But I don't correct myself, not wanting to call attention to my error.

"I am called Akhmim," it says smoothly. "You are a friend of Diyet's?"

Its familiarity infuriates me. Here I am, standing on the street in front of my mother's house, and it is pretending to be a man, with no respect for my reputation. If it is a man, what am I doing escorting a strange man? And if people know it is a harni, that is as bad. In the Nekropolis, people do not even like AI like the cleaning machine.

"Kari," I say, "Let's go."

She looks at the harni a moment more, then goes back to her little girl, picks her up, and carries her inside. Normally I would go inside, sit and talk with her mother, Ena. I would hold Tariam on my lap and wish I had a little girl with perfect tiny fingernails and such a clean, sweet milk smell. It would be cool and dark inside, the environment controlled, and we would eat honeysweets and drink tea. I would go across the street, see my mother and youngest brother, who is the only one at home now.

The harni stands in the street, looking at the ground. It seems uncomfortable. It does not look at me; at least it has the decency to make it appear we are not together.

Kari comes out, bracelets ringing. While we shop, she does not refer to the harni, but, as it follows us, she glances back at it often. I glance back and it flashes a white smile. It seems perfectly content to trail along, looking at the market stalls with their red canopies.

"Maybe we should let him walk with us," Kari says. "It seems rude to ignore him."

I laugh, full of nervousness. "It's not human."

"Does it have feelings?" Kari asks.

I shrug. "After a fashion. It is AI."

"It doesn't look like a machine," she says.

"It's not a machine," I say, irritated with her.

"How can it be AI if it is not a machine?" she presses.

"Because it's *manufactured*. A technician's creation. An artificial combination of genes, grown somewhere."

"Human genes?"

"Probably," I say. "Maybe some animal genes. Maybe some that they made up themselves, how would I know?" It is ruining my afternoon. "I wish it would offer to go home."

"Maybe he can't," Kari says. "If Mardin-salah told him to come, he would have to, wouldn't he?"

I don't really know anything about harni.

"It doesn't seem fair," Kari says. "Harni," she calls, "come here."

He tilts his head, all alert. "Yes, mistress?"

"Are harni prescripted for taste?" she inquires.

"What do you mean, the taste of food?" he asks. "I can taste, just as you do, although," he smiles, "I personally am not overly fond of cherries."

"No, no," Kari says. "Colors, clothing. Are you capable of helping make choices? About earrings for example?"

He comes to look at the choices, and selects a pair of gold and rose enamel teardrops and holds them up for her. "I think my taste is no better than that of the average person," he says, "but I like these."

She frowns, looks at him through her lashes. She has got me thinking of it as "him." And she is flirting with him! Kari! A married woman!

"What do you think, Diyet?" she asks. She takes the earrings, holds one beside her face. "They are pretty."

"I think they're gaudy."

She is hurt. In truth, they suit her.

She frowns at me. "I'll take them," she says. The stallman names a price.

"No, no, no," says the harni, "you should not buy them, this man is a thief." He reaches to touch her, as if he would pull her away, and I hold my breath in shock—if the thing should touch her!

But the stallman interrupts with a lower price. The harni bargains. He is a good bargainer, but he should be, he has no compassion, no concern for the stallkeeper. Charity is a human virtue. The Mashahana says, "A human in need becomes every man's child."

Interminable, this bargaining, but finally, the earrings are Kari's. "We should stop and have some tea," she says.

"I have a headache," I say, "I think I should go home."

"If Diyet is ill, we should go," the harni says.

Kari looks at me, looks away, guilty. She *should* feel guilt.

I come down the hall to access the Household AI and the harni is there. Apparently busy, but waiting for me. "I'll be finished in a minute and out of your way," it says. Beautiful fingers, wrist bones, beautiful face, and dark curling hair showing just where its shirt closes; it is constructed elegantly. Lean and long-legged, like a hound. When the technician constructed it, did he know how it would look when it was grown? Are they designed aesthetically?

It takes the report and steps aside, but does not go on with its work. I ignore it, doing my work as if it were not there, standing so it is behind me.

"Why don't you like me?" it finally asks.

I consider my answers. I could say it is a thing, not something to like or dislike, but that isn't true. I like my bed, my things. "Because of your arrogance," I say to the system.

A startled hiss of indrawn breath. "My . . . arrogance?" it asks.

"Your presumption." It is hard to keep my voice steady, every time I am around the harni I find myself hating the way I speak.

"I . . . I am sorry, Diyet," it whispers. "I have so little experience, I didn't realize I had insulted you."

I am tempted to turn around and look at it, but I do not. It does not really feel pain, I remind myself. It is a thing, it has no more feelings than a fish. Less.

"Please, tell me what I have done?"

"Your behavior. This conversation, here," I say. "You are always trying to make people think that you are human."

Silence. Is it considering? Or would it be better to say processing?

"You blame me for being what I am," the harni says. It sighs. "I cannot help being what I am."

I wait for it to say more, but it doesn't. I turn around, but it is gone.

After that, every time it sees me, if it can it makes some excuse to avoid me. I do not know if I am grateful or not. I am very uncomfortable.

My tasks are not complicated; I see to the cleaning machine, and set it loose in the women's household when it will not inconvenience the mistress. I am jessed to Mardin, although I serve the mistress. I am glad I am not jessed to her; Fadina is, and she has to put up with a great deal. I am careful never to blame the mistress in front of her. Let her blame the stupid little dog for crapping on the rug. She knows that the mistress is unreasonable, but of course, emotionally, she is bound to affection and duty.

On Friday mornings, the mistress is usually in her rooms, preparing for her Sunday *bismek*. On Friday afternoons, she goes out to play the Tiles with her friends and gossip about husbands and the wives who aren't there. I clean on Friday afternoons. I call the cleaning machine and it follows me down the hallway like a dog, snuffling along the baseboards for dust.

I open the door and smell attar of roses. The room is different, white marble floor veined with gold and amethyst, covered with purple rugs. Braziers and huge open windows looking out on a pillared walkway, beyond that vistas down to a lavender sea. It's the mistress' *bismek* setting. A young man is reading a letter on the walkway, a girl stands behind him, her face is tear-stained.

Interactive fantasies. The characters are generated from lists of traits, they're projections controlled by whoever is game-mistress of the *bismek* and fleshed out by the household AI. Everyone else comes over and becomes characters in the setting. There are poisonings and love affairs.

The mistress' setting is in ancient times and seems to be quite popular. Some of her friends have two or three identities in the game.

She usually turns it off when she goes out. The little cleaning machine stops. It can read the difference between reality and the projection, but she has ordered it never to enter the projection because she says the sight of the thing snuffling through walls damages her sense of the alternate reality. I reach behind the screen and turn the projection off so that I can clean. The scene disappears, even the usual projections, and there is the mistress' rooms and their bare walls. "Go ahead," I tell the machine and start for the mistress' rooms to pick up things for the laundry.

To my horror, the mistress steps out of her bedroom. Her hair is loose and long and disheveled, and she is dressed in a day robe, obviously not intending to go out. She sees me in the hall and stops in astonishment. Then her face darkens, her beautiful, heavy eyebrows folding toward her nose, and I instinctively start to back up. "Oh, Mistress," I say, "I am sorry, I didn't know you were in, I'm sorry, let me get the cleaning machine and leave, I'll just be out of here in a moment, I thought you had gone out to play the Tiles, I should have checked with Fadina, it is my fault, mistress—"

"Did you turn them off?" she demands. "You stupid girl, *did you turn Zarin and Nisea off?"*

I nod mutely.

"Oh Holy One," she says. "Ugly, incompetent girl! Are you completely lacking in sense? Did you think they would be there and I wouldn't be here? It's difficult enough to prepare without interference!"

"I'll turn it back on," I say.

"Don't touch anything!" she shrieks. "FADINA!" The mistress has a very popular *bismek* and Fadina is always explaining to me how difficult it is for the mistress to think up new and interesting scenarios for her friends' participation.

I keep backing up, hissing at the cleaning machine, while the mistress follows me down the hall shrieking "FADINA!" and because I am watching the mistress I back into Fadina coming in the door.

"Didn't you tell Diyet that I'd be in this afternoon?" the mistress says.

"Of course," Fadina says.

I am aghast. "You did not!" I say.

"I did, too," Fadina says. "You were at the access. I distinctly told you and you said you would clean later."

I start to defend myself and the mistress slaps me in the face. "Enough of you, girl," she says. And then the mistress makes me stand there and berates me, reaching out now and then to grab my hair and yank it painfully, because of course she believes Fadina when the girl is clearly lying to avoid punishment. I cannot believe that Fadina has done this to me; she is in terror of offending the mistress, but she has always been a good girl, and I am innocent. My cheek stings, and my head aches from having my hair yanked, but, worse, I am so angry and so, so humiliated.

Finally we are allowed to leave. I know I should give Fadina a piece of my mind, but I just want to escape. Out in the hall, Fadina grabs me so hard that her nails bite into the soft part under my arm. "I told you she was in an absolute frenzy about Saturday," she whispers. "I can't believe you did that! And now she'll be in a terrible mood all evening and I'm the one who will suffer for it!"

"Fadina," I protest.

"Don't you 'Fadina' me, Diyet! If I don't get a slap out of this, it will be the intervention of the Holy One!"

I have already gotten a slap, and it wasn't even my fault. I pull my arm away from Fadina and try to walk down the hall without losing my dignity. My face is hot and I am about to cry. Everything blurs in tears, so I duck into the linens and sit down on the hamper. I want to leave this place, I don't want to work for that old woman. I realize that my only friend in the world is Kari and now we are so far apart, and I feel so hurt and lonely that I just sob.

The door to the linens opens and I turn my back thinking, "Go away, whoever you are."

"Oh, excuse me," the harni says.

At least *it* will go away. But the thought that the only thing around is the harni makes me feel even lonelier. I cannot stop myself from sobbing.

"Diyet," it says hesitantly, "are you all right?"

I can't answer. I want it to go away, and I don't.

After a moment, it says from right behind me, "Diyet, are you ill?"

I shake my head.

I can feel it standing there, perplexed, but I don't know what to do and I can't stop crying and I feel so foolish. I want my mother. Not that she would do anything other than remind me that the world is not fair. My mother believes in facing reality. Be strong, she always says. And that makes me cry harder.

After a minute, I hear the harni leave, and, awash in self pity, I even cry over that. My feelings of foolishness are beginning to outweigh my feelings of unhappiness, but perversely enough I realize that I am enjoying my cry. That it has been inside me, building stronger and stronger, and I didn't even know it.

Then someone comes in again, and I straighten my back again, and pretend to be checking towels. The only person it could be is Fadina.

It is the harni, with a box of tissues. He crouches beside me, his face full of concern. "Here," he says.

Embarrassed, I take one. If you didn't know, you would think he was a regular human. He even smells of clean man-scent. Like my brothers.

I blow my nose, wondering if harni ever cry. "Thank you," I say.

"I was afraid you were ill," he says.

I shake my head. "No, I am just angry."

"You cry when you are angry?" he asks.

"The mistress is upset at me and it's Fadina's fault, but I had to take the blame." That makes me start to cry again, but the harni is patient and he just crouches next to me in among the linens, holding the box of tissues. By the time I collect myself, there is a little crumpled pile of tissues and some have tumbled to the floor. I take two tissues and start folding them into a flower, like my mother makes.

"Why are you so nice to me when I am so mean to you?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Because you do not want to be mean to me," he says. "It makes you suffer. I am sorry that I make you so uncomfortable."

"But you can't help being what you are," I say. My eyes are probably red. Harni never cry, I am certain. They are too perfect. I keep my eyes on the flower.

"Neither can you," he says. "When Mardin-salah made you take me with you on your day off, you were not even free to be angry with him. I knew that was why you were angry with me." He has eyes like Fhassin, my brother (who had long eyelashes like a girl, just like the harni).

Thinking about Mardin-salah makes my head ache a little and I think of something else. I remember and cover my mouth in horror. "Oh no."

"What is it?" he asks.

"I think . . . I think Fadina *did* tell me that the mistress would be in, but I was, was thinking of something else, and I didn't pay attention." I was standing at the access, wondering if the harni was around, since that was where I was most likely to run into him.

"It is natural enough," he says, unnatural thing that he is. "If Fadina weren't jessed, she would probably be more understanding."

He is prescripted to be kind, I remind myself. I should not ascribe human motives to an AI. But I haven't been fair to him, and he is the only one in the whole household sitting here among the linens with a box of tissues. I fluff out the folds of the flower and put it among the linens. A white tissue flower, a funeral flower.

"Thank you . . . Akhmim." It is hard to say his name.

He smiles. "Do not be sad, Diyet."

I am careful and avoid the eye of the mistress as much as I can. Fadina is civil to me, but not friendly. She says hello to me, politely, and goes on with whatever she is doing.

It is Akhmim, the harni, who stops me one evening and says, "The mistress wants us for *bismek* tomorrow." It's not the first time I've been asked to stand in, but usually it's Fadina who lets me know and tells me what I'm supposed to do. Lately, however, I have tried to be kind to Akhmim. He is easy to talk to, and like me he is alone in the household.

"What are we supposed to be?" I ask.

The harni flicks his long fingers dismissively, "Servants, of course. What's it like?"

"*Bismek?*" I shrug. "Play-acting."

"Like children's games?" he asks, looking doubtful.

"Well, yes and no. It's been going on a couple of years now and there are hundreds of characters," I say. "The ladies all have roles, and you have to remember to call them by their character names and not their real names, and you have to pretend it's all real. All sorts of things happen; people get in trouble and they all figure out elaborate plots to get out of trouble and people get strange illnesses and everybody professes their undying affection. The mistress threw her best friend in prison for awhile, Fadina said that was very popular."

He looks at me for a moment, blinking his long eyelashes. "You are making fun of me, Diyet," he says, doubtful.

"No," I say laughing, "it is true." It is, too. "Akhmim, no one is ever really hurt or uncomfortable."

I think he cannot decide whether to believe me or not.

Saturday afternoon, I am dressed in a pagan-looking robe that leaves one shoulder bare. And makes me look ridiculous, I might add. I am probably a server. Projections are prettier than real people, but they aren't very good at handing out real food.

I am in the mistress' quarters early. The scent of some heavy, almost bitter incense is overwhelming. The cook is laying out real food, using our own service, but the table is too tall to sit at on the floor, and there are candles and brass bowls of dates to make it look antique. Without the projection, the elaborate table looks odd in the room, which is otherwise empty of furniture. Akhmim is helping, bringing in lounging chairs so that the guests can recline at the table. He is dressed in a white robe that comes to his knees and brown sandals that have elaborate criss-cross ties, and, like me, his shoulder is bare. But the harni looks graceful. Maybe people really did wear clothes like this. I am embarrassed to be seen by a man with my shoulder and neck bare. Remember, I think, Akhmim is what he is, he is not really a man or he wouldn't be here. The mistress wouldn't have a man at *bismek,* not in her quarters. Everyone would be too uncomfortable, and Mardin-salah would never allow it.

Akhmim looks up, smiles at me, comes over. "Diyet," he says, "Fadina says that the mistress is in a terrible mood."

"She is always in a terrible mood when she is nervous," I say.

"*I'm* nervous."

"Akhmim!" I say, laughing, "don't worry."

"I don't understand any of this playing pretend," he wails softly, "I never had a childhood!"

I take his hand and squeeze it. If he were a man, I would not touch him. "You'll do fine. We don't have to do much anyway, just serve dinner. Surely you can manage that, probably better than I can."

He bites his lower lip, and I am suddenly so reminded of my brother Fhassin I could cry. But I just squeeze his hand again. I'm nervous, too, but not about serving dinner. I have avoided the mistress since the incident with the cleaning machine.

Fadina comes in and turns on the projection, and suddenly the white marble room glows around us, full of servants and musicians tuning up. I feel better, able to hide in the crowd. Akhmim glances around. "It *is* exciting," he says thoughtfully.

There are five guests, Fadina greets them at the door and takes them back to the wardrobe to change. Five middle-aged women, come to pretend. I tell Akhmim their character names as they come in so that he knows what to call them.

The musicians start playing; projections, male and female, recline on projected couches. I know some of their names. Of course, they have projected servers and projected food. I wish I knew what the scenario was, usually Fadina tells me ahead of time, but she doesn't talk much to me these days. Pretty soon the mistress comes in with the real guests, and they all find the real couches, where they can talk to each other. First is bread and cheese, already on the table, and Akhmim has to pour wine, but I just stand there, next to a projected servant. Even this close she seems real, exotic with her pale hair. I ask her what her name is and she whispers, "Miri." Fadina is standing next to the mistress' couch, she glares at me. I'm not supposed to make the household AI do extra work.

The first part of the meal is boring. The mistress' friends get up once in awhile to whisper to each other or a projection, and projections do the same thing. There's some sort of intrigue going on, people look very tense and excited. Akhmim and I glance at each other and he smiles. While I am serving, I whisper to him, "Not so bad, is it?"

The two lovers I turned off are at this dinner, I guess they are important characters right now. The mistress' friends are always there, but the projections change so fast. The girl is apparently supposed to be the daughter of one of the mistress' friends. It will be something to do with the girl, I imagine.

Almost two hours into the dinner, the girl is arguing with her lover and stands up to leave—her eyes roll back in her head and she falls to the marble floor, thrashing. There is hysterical activity, projected characters rushing to the girl, the woman whose character is supposed to be the mother of the girl behaving with theatrical dignity in the circle of real women. The male lover is hysterical, kneeling and sobbing. It makes me uncomfortable, both the seizures and the reactions. I look for Akhmim, he is standing against the wall, holding a pitcher of wine, observing. He looks thoughtful. The girl's lover reaches on to the table and picks up her wine glass while everybody else watches him. The action is so highlighted that only an idiot would fail to realize that it's supposed to be important. The "mother" shrieks suddenly, "Stop him! It's poison!" And there is more hysterical activity, but they are too late. The lover drinks down the wine. The "mother" is "held back" by her friends, expeditious since the other characters are projections and she would look foolish trying to touch them.

I am embarrassed by the melodrama, by the way these women play with violence. I look back at Akhmim, but he's still observing. What does he think, I wonder.

There is a call for a physician, projections rush to and fro. There is a long, drawn-out death scene for the girl, followed by an equally long death for the lover. The women are openly sobbing, even Fadina. I clasp my hands together, squeeze them, look at the floor. Finally, everything is played out. They sit around the "dining room" and discuss the scenario and how masterful it was. The mistress looks drained but pleased. One by one the women pad back and change, then let themselves out until only the mistress and the "mother" are left.

"It was wonderful," she keeps telling the mistress.

"As good as when Hekmet was ill?" the mistress asks.

"Oh, yes. It was wonderful!" Finally they go back to change, Fadina following to help, and Akhmim and I can start clearing the dishes off the table.

"So what did you think," I ask, "was it what you expected?"

Akhmim makes a non-committal gesture.

I stack plates and dump them on a tray. Akhmim boosts the tray, balancing it at his shoulder like a waiter. He is really much stronger than he looks. "You don't like it," he says finally.

I shake my head.

"Why not, because it's not real?"

"All this violence," I say. "Nobody would want to live this way. Nobody would want these things to happen to them." I am collecting wine glasses, colored transparent blue and rose like soap bubbles.

He stands looking at me, observing me the way he did the women, I think. What do we look like to harni? He is beautiful, the tray balanced effortlessly, the muscles of his bare arm and shoulder visible. He looks pagan enough in his white robe, with his perfect, timeless face. Even his long curly hair seems right.

I try to explain. "They entertain themselves with suffering."

"They're only projections," he says.

"But they seem real, the whole point is to forget they're projections, isn't it?" The glasses ring against each other as I collect them.

Softly he says, "They are bored women, what do they have in their lives?"

I want him to understand how I am different. "You can't tell me it doesn't affect the way they see people, look at the way the mistress treats Fadina!" Akhmim tries to interrupt me, but I want to finish what I am saying. "She wants excitement, even if it means watching death. Watching a seizure, that's not entertaining, not unless there's something wrong. It's decadent, what they do, it's . . . it's sinful! Death isn't entertainment."

"Diyet!" he says.

Then the mistress grabs my hair and yanks me around and all the glasses in my arms fall to the floor and shatter.

Sweet childhood. Adulthood is salty. Not that it's not rewarding, mind you, just different. The rewards of childhood are joy and pleasure, but the rewards of adulthood are strength. I am punished, but it is light punishment, not something that demands so much strength. The mistress beats me. She doesn't really hurt me much, it's noisy and frightening, and I cut my knee where I kneel in broken glass, but no serious damage. I am locked in my room and only allowed punishment food: bread, tea, and a little cheese, but I can have all the paper I want, and I fill my rooms with flowers. White paper roses, white iris with petals curling down to reveal their centers, snowy calla lilies like trumpets and poppies and tulips of luscious paper with nap like velvet. My walls are white and the world is white, filled with white flowers.

"How about daisies," Akhmim asks. He comes to bring me my food and my paper.

"Too innocent," I say. "Daisies are only for children."

Fadina recommended to the mistress that Akhmim be my jailer. She thinks that I hate to have him near me, but I couldn't have asked for better company than the harni. He's never impatient, never comes to me asking for attention to his own problems. He wants to learn how to make flowers. I try to teach him but he can never learn to do anything but awkwardly copy my model. "You make them out of your own head," he says. His clever fingers stumble and crease the paper or turn it.

"My mother makes birds, too," I say.

"Can you make birds?" he asks.

I don't want to make birds, just flowers.

I think about the Nekropolis. Akhmim is doing his duties and mine, too, so he is busy during the day and mostly, I am alone. When I am not making flowers I sit and look out my window, watching the street, or I sleep. It is probably because I am not getting so much to eat, but I can sleep for hours. A week passes, then two. Sometimes I feel as if I have to get out of this room, but then I ask myself where I would want to go and I realize that it doesn't make any difference. This room, the outside, they are all the same place, except that this room is safe.

The place I want to go is the Nekropolis, the one in my mind, but it's gone. I was the eldest, then my sister, Larit, then my brother, Fhassin, and then the baby boy, Michim. In families of four, underneath the fighting, there is always pairing, two and two. Fhassin and I were a pair. My brother. I think a lot about Fhassin and about the Nekropolis, locked in my room.

I sleep, eat my little breakfast that Akhmim brings me, sleep again. Then I sit at the window or make flowers, sleep again. The only time that is bad is late afternoon, early evening, when I have slept so much that I can't sleep any more and my stomach is growling and growling. I feel fretful and teary. When Akhmim comes in the evening with dinner he bruises my senses until I get accustomed to his being there; his voice has so many shades, his skin is so much more supple, so much more oiled and textured than paper, that he overwhelms me.

Sometimes he sits with his arms around my shoulders and I lean against him. I pretend intimacy doesn't matter because he is only a harni, but I know that I am lying to myself. How could I ever have thought him safe because he was made rather than born? I understood from the first that he wasn't to be trusted, but actually it was I that couldn't be trusted.

He is curious about my childhood, he says he never was a child. To keep him close to me I tell him everything I can remember about growing up, all the children's games, teach him the songs we skipped rope to, the rhymes we used to pick who was it, everybody with their fists in the center, tapping a fist on every stress as we chanted:

ONCE my SIS-ter HAD a HOUSE,
THEN she LEFT it TO a MOUSE,
SING a SONG
TELL a LIE
KISS my SIS-ter
SAY good-BYE

"What does it mean," he asks, laughing.

"It doesn't mean anything," I explain, "it's a way of picking who is it. Who is the fox, or who holds the broom while everybody hides." I tell him about fox and hounds, about how my brother Fhassin was a daredevil and one time to get away he climbed to the roof of Kari's grandmother's house and ran along the roofs and how our mother punished him. And of how we got in a fight and I pushed him and he fell and broke his collarbone.

"What does Kari do?" he asks.

"Kari is married," I say. "Her husband works, he directs a lorritank, like the one that delivers water."

"Did you ever have a boyfriend?" he asks.

"I did, his name was Zard."

"Why didn't you marry?" he asks. He is so innocent.

"It didn't work," I say.

"Is that why you became jessed?"

"No," I say.

He is patient, he waits.

"No," I say again. "It was because of Shusilina."

And then I have to explain.

Shusilina moved into the death house across the street, where Kari's grand had lived until he died. Kari's grand had been a soldier when he was young, and to be brave for the Holy he had a Serinitin implant, so that when he was old he didn't remember who he was anymore. And when he died, Shusilina and her husband moved in. Shusilina had white hair and had had her ears pointed and she wanted a baby. I was only twenty, and trying to decide whether I should marry Zard. He had not asked me, but I thought he might, and I wasn't sure what I should answer. Shusilina was younger than me, nineteen, but she wanted a baby, and that seemed terribly adult. And she had come from outside the Nekropolis, and had pointed ears, and everybody thought she was just a little too good for herself.

We talked about Zard, and she told me that after marriage everything was not milk and honey. She was very vague on just what she meant by that, but I should know that it was not like it seemed now, when I was in love with Zard. I should give myself over to him, but I should hold some part of myself private, for myself, and not let marriage swallow me.

Now I realize that she was a young bride trying to learn the difference between romance and life, and the conversations are obvious and adolescent, but then it seemed so adult to talk about marriage this way. It was like something sacred, and I was being initiated into mysteries. I dyed my hair white.

My sister hated her. Michim made eyes at her all the time but he was only thirteen. Fhassin was seventeen and he laughed at Michim. Fhassin laughed at all sorts of things. He looked at the world from under his long eyelashes, so in contrast with his sharp-chinned face and monkey grin. That was the year Fhassin, who had always been shorter than everybody, almost shorter than Michim, suddenly grew so tall. He was visited by giggling girls, but he never took any of them seriously.

It was all outside, not inside the family. In the evenings we sat on the floor in the middle of our three death houses and made paper flowers. We lived in a house filled with perfume. I was twenty, Larit was nineteen, but nobody had left my mother's house, and we never thought that was strange. But it was, the way we were held there.

So when did Fhassin stop seeing her as silly and begin to see Shusilina as a person? I didn't suspect it. The giggling girls still came by the house, and Fhassin still grinned and didn't really pay much attention. They were careful, meeting in the afternoon when her husband was building new death-houses at the other end of the Nekropolis and the rest of us were sleeping.

I think Fhassin did it because he was always a daredevil, like walking on the roofs of the death-houses, or the time he took money out of our mother's money pot so he could sneak out and ride the Tube. He was lost in the city for hours, finally sneaking back onto the Tube and risking getting caught as a free-farer.

No, that isn't true. The truth must be that he fell in love with her. I had never really been in love with Zard, maybe I have never been in love with anyone. How could I understand? I couldn't stand the thought of leaving the family to marry Zard, how could *he* turn his back on the family for Shusilina? But some alchemy must have transformed him, made him see her as something other than a vain and silly girl—yes, it's a cliché to call her a vain and silly girl, but that's what she was. She was married, and it wasn't very exciting anymore, not nearly as interesting as when her husband was courting her. Fhassin made her feel important, look at the risk he was taking, for her. For her!

But what was going on in Fhassin? Fhassin despised romantic love, sentimentality.

Her husband suspected, laid in wait and caught them, the neighborhood poured out into the street to see my brother, shirtless, protecting Shusilina whose hair was all unbound around her shoulders. Fhassin had a razor, and was holding off her screaming husband. The heat poured all over his brown, adolescent shoulders and chest. We stood in the street, sweating. And Fhassin was laughing, deadly serious, but laughing. He was so alive. Was it the intensity? Was that the lure for Fhassin? This was my brother, who I had known all my life, and he was a stranger.

I realized that the Nekropolis was a foreign place, and I didn't know anyone behind the skinmask of their face.

They took my brother and Shusilina, divorced her from her husband for the adultery trial, and flogged them both, then dumped them in prison for seven years. I did not wait for Zard to ask me to marry him—not that he would have, now. I let my hair go black. I became a dutiful daughter. When I was twenty-one, I was jessed, impressed to feel duty and affection for whoever would pay the fee of my impression.

Akhmim doesn't understand. He has to go. I cry when he's gone.

Finally, after twenty-eight days, I emerge from my room, white and trembling like Iqurth from the tomb, to face the world and my duties. I don't know what the mistress has told Mardin, but I am subjected to a vague lecture I'm sure Mardin thinks of as fatherly. Fadina avoids meeting my eyes when she sees me. The girl who works with the cook watches the floor. I move like a ghost through the woman's quarters. Only the mistress sees me, fastens her eyes on me when I happen to pass her, and her look is cruel. If I hear her, I take to stepping out of the hall if I can.

Friday afternoon, she is playing the Tiles, and I take the cleaning machine to her room. I have checked with Fadina, to confirm that she is not in, but I cannot convince myself that she has left. Perhaps Fadina has forgotten, perhaps the mistress has not told her. I creep in and stand listening. The usual projection is on—not *bismek* but the everyday clutter of silks and fragile tables with silver lace frames, antique lamps, paisley scarves and cobalt pottery. The cleaning machine will not go in. I stop and listen, no sound but the breeze through the window hangings. I creep through the quarters, shaking. The bed is unmade, a tumble of blue and silver brocade. That's unusual, Fadina always makes it. I think about making it, but I decide I had better not, do what I always do or the mistress will be on me. Best do only what is safe. I pick up the clothes off the floor and creep back and turn off the projection. The machine starts.

If she comes back early what will I do? I stand by the projection switch, unwilling to leave even to put the clothing in the laundry. If she comes back, when I hear her, I will snap on the projection machine. The cleaning machine will stop and I will take it and leave. It is the best I can do.

The cleaning machine snuffles around, getting dust from the window sills and table tops, cleaning the floor. It is so slow. I keep thinking I hear her and snapping on the projection. The machine stops and I listen, but I don't hear anything so I snap the projection off and the cleaning machine starts again. Finally the rooms are done, and the cleaning machine and I make our escape. I have used extra scent on the sheets in the linen closet, the way she likes them, and I have put extra oil in the rings on the lights and extra scent in the air freshener. It is all a waste, all that money, but that's what she likes.

I have a terrible headache. I go to my room and wait and try to sleep until the headache is gone. I am asleep when Fadina bangs on my door and I feel groggy and disheveled.

"The mistress wants you," she snaps, glaring at me.

I can't go.

I can't *not* go. I follow her without doing up my hair or putting on my sandals.

The mistress is sitting in her bedroom, still dressed up in saffron and veils. I imagine she has just gotten back. "Diyet," she says, "did you clean my rooms?"

What did I disturb? I didn't do anything to this room except pick up the laundry and run the cleaning machine; is something missing? "Yes, mistress," I say. Oh, my heart.

"Look at this room," she hisses.

I look, not knowing what I am looking for.

"Look at the bed!"

The bed looks just the same as it did when I came in, blankets and sheets tumbled, shining blue and silver, the scent of her perfume in the cool air.

"Come here," the mistress commands, "kneel down." I kneel down so that I am not taller than she is. She looks at me for a moment, so angry that she doesn't seem able to speak. Then, I see it coming but I can't do anything, up comes her hands and she slaps me. I topple sideways, mostly from surprise. "Are you too stupid to even know to make a bed?"

"Fadina always makes your bed," I say. I should have made it, I should have. Holy One, I am such an idiot.

"So the one time Fadina doesn't do your work you are too lazy to do it yourself?"

"Mistress," I say, "I was afraid to—"

"You *should* be afraid!" she shouts. She slaps me, both sides of my face, and shouts at me, her face close to mine. On and on. I don't listen, it's just sound. Fadina walks me to the door. I am holding my head up, trying to maintain some dignity. "Diyet," Fadina whispers.

"What?" I say, thinking maybe she has realized that it's the mistress, that it's not my fault.

But she just shakes her head, "Try not to upset her, that's all. Just don't upset her." Her face is pleading, she wants me to understand.

Understand what? That she is jessed? As Akhmim says, we are only what we are.

But I understand what it is going to be like now. The mistress hates me, and there's nothing I can do. The only way to escape is to ask Mardin to sell me off, but then I would have to leave Akhmim. And since he's a harni he can't even ride the Tube without someone else providing credit. If I leave, I'll never see him again.

The room is full of whispers. The window is open and the breeze rustles among the paper flowers. There are flowers everywhere, on the dresser, the chairs. Akhmim and I sit in the dark room, lit only by the light from the street. He is sitting with one leg underneath him. Like some animal, a panther, indolent.

"You'll still be young when I'm old," I say.

"No," he says. That is all, just the one word.

"Do you get old?"

"If we live out our natural span. About sixty, sixty-five years."

"Do you get wrinkles? White hair?"

"Some. Our joints get bad, swell, like arthritis. Things go wrong." He is so quiet tonight. Usually he is cheerful.

"You are so patient," I say.

He makes a gesture with his hands, "It does not matter."

"Is it hard for you to be patient?"

"Sometimes," he says. "I feel frustration, anger, fear. But we are bred to be patient."

"What's wrong?" I ask. I sound like a little girl, my voice all breathy.

"I am thinking. You should leave here."

The mistress is always finding something. Nothing I do is right. She pulls my hair, confines me to my room. "I can't," I say, "I'm jessed."

He is so still in the twilight.

"Akhmim," I say, suddenly cruel, "do you want me to go?"

"Harni are not supposed to have 'wants,' " he says, his voice flat. I have never heard him say the word "harni." It sounds obscene. It makes me get up, his voice. It fills me with nervousness, with aimless energy. If he is despairing, what is there for me? I leave the window, brush my fingers across the desk, hearing the flowers rustle. I touch all the furniture, and take an armload of flowers, crisp and cool, and I drop them in his lap. "What?" he says. I take more flowers and throw them over his shoulders. His face is turned up at me, lit by the light from the street, full of wonder. I gather flowers off the chair, drop them on him. There are flowers all over the bed, funeral flowers. He reaches up, flowers spilling off his sleeves, and takes my arms to make me stop, saying, "Diyet, what?" I lean forward and close my eyes.

I wait, hearing the breeze rustle the lilies, the poppies, the roses on the bed. I wait forever. Until he finally kisses me.

He won't do any more than kiss me. Lying among all the crushed flowers he will stroke my face, my hair, he will kiss me, but that is all.

"You have to leave," he says, desperately. "You have to tell Mardin, tell him to sell you."

I won't leave. I have nothing to go to.

"Do you love me because you have to? Is it because you are a harni and I am a human and you have to serve me?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"Do you love me because of us?" I press. There are no words for the questions I am asking him.

"Diyet," he says.

"Do you love the mistress?"

"No," he says.

"You should love the mistress, shouldn't you, but you love me."

"Go home, go to the Nekropolis. Run away," he urges, kissing my throat, tiny little kisses, as if he has been thinking of my throat for a long time.

"Run away? From Mardin? What would I do for the rest of my life? Make paper flowers?"

"What would be wrong with that?"

"Would you come with me?" I ask.

He sighs and raises up on his elbow. "You should not fall in love with me."

This is funny. "This is a fine time to tell me."

"No," he says, "it is true." He counts on his fine fingers, "One, I am a harni, not a human being, and I belong to someone else. Two, I have caused all of your problems, if I had not been here, you would not have had all your troubles. Three, the reason it is wrong for a human to love a harni is because harni-human relationships are bad paradigms for human behavior, they lead to difficulty in dealing with human-to-human relationships—"

"I don't *have* any human-to-human relationships," I interrupt.

"You will, you are just young."

I laugh at him. "Akhmim, you're younger than *I* am! Prescripted wisdom."

"But wisdom nonetheless," he says, solemnly.

"Then why did you kiss me?" I ask.

He sighs. It is such a human thing, that sigh, full of frustration. "Because you are so sad."

"I'm not sad right now," I say. "I'm happy because you are here." I am also nervous. Afraid. Because this is all so strange, and even though I keep telling myself that he's so human, I am afraid that underneath he is really alien, more unknowable than my brother. But I want him to stay with me. And I am happy. Afraid but happy.

My lover. "I want you to be my lover," I say.

"No." He sits up. He is beautiful, even disheveled. I can imagine what I look like. Maybe he does not even like me, maybe he has to act this way because I want it. He runs his fingers through his hair, his earring gleams in the light from the street.

"Do harni fall in love?" I ask.

"I have to go," he says. "We've crushed your flowers." He picks up a lily whose long petals have become twisted and crumpled and tries to straighten it out.

"I can make more. Do you have to do this because I want you to?"

"No," he says very quietly. Then more clearly, like a recitation, "Harni don't have feelings, not in the sense that humans do. We are loyal, flexible, and affectionate."

"That makes you sound like a smart dog," I say, irritated.

"Yes," he says, "that is what I am, a smart dog, a very smart dog. Good night, Diyet."

When he opens the door, the breeze draws and the flowers rustle, and some tumble off the bed, trying to follow him.

"Daughter," Mardin says, "I am not sure that this is the best situation for you." He looks at me kindly. I wish Mardin did not think that he had to be my father.

"Mardin-salah?" I say, "I don't understand, has my work been unsatisfactory?" Of course my work has been unsatisfactory, the mistress hates me. But I am afraid they have somehow realized what is between Akhmim and me—although I don't know how they could. Akhmim is avoiding me again.

"No, no," he waves his hand airily, "your accounts are in order, you have been a good and frugal girl. It is not your fault."

"I . . . I am aware that I have been clumsy, that perhaps I have not always understood what the mistress wished, but Mardin-salah, I am improving!" I am getting better at ignoring her, I mean. I don't want him to feel inadequate. Sitting here, I realize the trouble I've caused him. He hates having to deal with the household in any but the most perfunctory way. I am jessed to this man, his feelings matter to me. Rejection of my services is painful. This has been a good job, I have been able to save some of my side money so that when I am old I won't be like my mother, forced to struggle and hope that the children will be able to support her when she can't work anymore.

Mardin is uncomfortable. The part of me that is not jessed can see that this is not the kind of duty that Mardin likes. This is not how he sees himself; he prefers to be the benevolent patriarch. "Daughter," he says, "you have been exemplary, but wives. . . ." he sighs. "Sometimes, child, they get whims, and it is better for me, and for you, if we find you some good position with another household."

At least he hasn't said anything about Akhmim. I bow my head because I am afraid I will cry. I study my toes. I try not to think of Akhmim. Alone again. Oh Holy One, I am so tired of being alone. I will be alone my whole life, jessed women do not marry. I cannot help it, I start to cry. Mardin takes it as a sign of my loyalty and pats me gently on the shoulder. "There, there, child, it will be all right."

I don't want Mardin to comfort me. The part of me that watches, that isn't jessed, doesn't even really *like* Mardin—but at the same time, I want to make him happy, so I gamely sniff and try to smile. "I, I know you know what is best," I manage. But my distress makes him uncomfortable. So he says when arrangements are made he will tell me.

I look for Akhmim, to tell him, but he stays in the men's side of the house, away from the middle where we eat, and far away from the women's side.

I begin to understand. He didn't love me, it was just that he was a harni, and it was *me* . . . I led him to myself. Maybe I am no better than Shusilina, with her white hair and pointed ears. So I work, what else is there to do? And I avoid the mistress. Evidently Mardin has told her he is getting rid of me, because the attacks cease. Fadina even smiles at me, if distantly. I would like to make friends with Fadina again, but she doesn't give me a chance. So I will never see him again. He isn't even that far from me, and I will never see him again.

There is nothing to be done about it. Akhmim avoids me. I look across the courtyard or across the dining room at the men's side, but I almost never see him. Once in awhile he's there, with his long curly hair and his black gazelle eyes, but he doesn't look at me.

I pack my things. My new mistress comes. She is a tall, gray-haired woman with slightly pop-eyes. She has a breathy voice and a way of hunching her shoulders as if she wished she were actually a very small woman. I am supposed to give her my life? It is monstrous.

We are in Mardin's office. I am upset. I want desperately to leave, I am so afraid of coming into a room and finding the mistress. I am trying not to think of Akhmim. But what is most upsetting is the thought of leaving Mardin. Will the next girl understand that he wants to pretend that he is frugal, but that he really is not? I am nearly overwhelmed by shame because I have caused this. I am only leaving because of my own foolishness, and I have failed Mardin, who only wanted peace.

I will not cry. These are impressed emotions. Soon I will feel them for this strange woman. Oh Holy, what rotten luck to have gotten this woman for a mistress. She wears bronze and white—bronze was all the fashion when I first came and the mistress wore it often—but this is years after and these are second-rate clothes, a young girl's clothes and not suited to my mistress at all. She is nervous, wanting me to like her, and all I want to do is throw myself at Mardin's feet and embarrass him into saying that I can stay.

Mardin says, "Diyet, she has paid the fee." He shows me the credit transaction and I see that the fee is lower than it was when I came to Mardin's household. "I order you to accept this woman as your new mistress."

That's it. That's the trigger. I feel a little disoriented. I never really noticed how the skin under Mardin's jaw was soft and lax. He is actually rather nondescript. I wonder what it must be like for the mistress to have married him. She is tall and vivid, if a bit heavy, and was a beauty in her day. She must find him disappointing. No wonder she is bitter.

My new mistress smiles tentatively. Well, she may not be fashionable, the way my old mistress was, but she looks kind. I hope so, I would like to live in a kind household. I smile back at her.

That is it. I am impressed.

My new household is much smaller than the old one. The mistress' last housekeeper was clearly inefficient. I am busy for days, just trying to put things in order. I must be frugal, there is much less money in this house. It is surprising how much I have gotten accustomed to money at Mardin's house; this is much more like I grew up.

I do inventories of the linens and clean all the rooms from top to bottom. At first I am nervous, but my new mistress is not like the old one at all. She watches me work as if astounded, and she is never offended if she walks in her room and I have the cleaning machine going. I learn not to work too much around her, she is oddly sensitive about it. She won't say anything, but she will start to make funny little embarrassed/helpful gestures, or suggest that I get myself some tea. Her husband is an old man. He smiles at me and tells me very bad jokes, puns, and I have to laugh to be polite. I would like to avoid him because he bores me nearly to tears. They have a daughter who is a terror. She is in trouble all the time. She spends money, takes her mother's credit chip without asking—they have been forced to put a governor on daily purchases and they are in the process of locking the girl out of the parents' credit.

The daughter is nice enough to me, but her politeness is false. She argues with her mother about spending money on getting a jessed servant instead of sending her to school. But the daughter's marks at academy are dreadful and the mistress says she will not waste money on more.

Akhmim. I think of him all the time.

Emboldened by my mistress' approval, I rearrange the furniture. I take some things she has—they are not very nice—and put them up. I re-program the household AI. It is very limited, insufficient for anything as complicated as *bismek*, but it can handle projections, of course. I remember the things my old mistress used to like and I put around cobalt blue vases and silver framed pictures. Marble floors would overwhelm these rooms, but the tile I pick is nice.

My days are free on Tuesday and half-a-day Sunday. Tuesday my mistress apologizes to me. They are a little tight on credit and she cannot advance my leisure allowance until Sunday, do I mind?

Well, a little, but I say I don't. I spend the afternoon making flowers.

When I make flowers I think of Akhmim and myself on the bed surrounded by crushed carnations and iris. It isn't good to think about Akhmim, he doesn't miss me, I'm sure. He is a harni, always an owned thing, subject to the whims of his owners. If they had constructed him with lasting loyalties, his life would be horrible. Surely when the technician constructed his genes, he made certain that Akhmim would forget quickly. He told me that harni do not love. But he also told me that they did. And he told he didn't love the mistress, but maybe he only said that because he had to, because I did not love the old mistress and his duty is to make humans happy.

I put the flowers in a vase. My mistress is delighted, she thinks they are lovely.

Long lilies, spiked stamens and long petals like lolling tongues. Sometimes feelings are in me that have no words, and I look at the paper flowers and want to rip them to pieces.

On Sunday, my mistress has my leisure allowance. Mardin used to add a little something extra, but I realize that in my new circumstances I can't expect that. I go to the Moussin of the White Falcon, on the edge of the Nekropolis, to listen to the service.

Then I take the tube to the street of Mardin's house. I don't even intend to walk down the street, but of course I do. And I stand outside the house, looking for a sign of Akhmim. I'm afraid to stand long, I don't want anyone to see me. What would I tell them, that I'm homesick? I'm jessed.

I like to take something to do on the tube, so the ride is not so boring. I have brought a bag full of paper to make flowers. I think I'll earn a little money on the side by making wreaths. I am not allowed to give it to my mistress, that's against the law. It's to protect the jessed that this is true.

In the Nekropolis, we lived in death houses, surrounded by death. Perhaps it isn't odd that I'm a bit morbid, and perhaps that is why I pull a flower out of my bag and leave it on a window sill on the men's side of the house. After all, something did die, although I can't put in words exactly what it was. I don't really know which window is Akhmim's, but it doesn't matter, it's just a gesture. It only makes me feel foolish.

Monday I wake early and drink hot, strong mate. I take buckets of water and scrub down the stone courtyard. I make a list of all the repairs that need to be done. I take the mistress' printouts and bundle them. She saves them, she subscribes to several services and she feels that they might be useful. My old mistress would have quite a lot to say about someone who would save printouts. The mistress goes out to shop, and I clean everything in her storage. She has clothes she should throw out, things fifteen years old and hopelessly out of date. (I remember when I wore my hair white. And later when we used to wrap our hair in veils, the points trailing to the backs of our knees. We looked so foolish, so affected. What are young girls wearing now? How did I get to be so old, I'm not even thirty.)

I put aside all the things I should mend, but I don't want to sit yet. I run the cleaning machine, an old clumsy thing even stupider than the one at Mardin's. I push myself all day, a whirlwind. There is not enough in this house to do, even if I clean the cleaning machine, so I clean some rooms twice.

Still, when it is time to sleep, I can't. I sit in my room making a funeral wreath of carnations and tiny, half-open roses. The white roses gleam like satin.

I wake up on my free day, tired and stiff. In the mirror, I look ghastly, my hair tangled and my eyes puffy. Just as well the harni never saw me like this, I think. But I won't think of Akhmim any more. That part of my life is over, and I have laid a flower at its death house. Today I will take my funeral wreaths around and see if I can find a shop that will buy them. They are good work, surely someone will be interested. It would just be pocket money, take a little of the strain off my mistress, she would not feel then as if she wasn't providing extras for me if I can provide them for myself.

I take the tube all the way to the Nekropolis, carefully protecting my wreaths from the other commuters. All day I walk through the Nekropolis, talking to stall keepers, stopping sometimes for tea, and when I have sold the wreaths, sitting for awhile to watch the people, letting my tired mind empty.

I am at peace, now I can go back to my mistress.

The Mashahana tells us that the darkness in ourselves is a sinister thing. It waits until we relax, it waits until we reach the most vulnerable moments, and then it snares us. I want to be dutiful, I want to do what I should. But when I go back to the tube, I think of where I am going; to that small house and my empty room. What will I do tonight? Make more paper flowers, more wreaths? I am sick of them. Sick of the Nekropolis.

I can take the tube to my mistress' house, or I can go by the street where Mardin's house is. I'm tired, I'm ready to go to my little room and relax. Oh, Holy One, I dread the empty evening. Maybe I should go by the street just to fill up time. I have all this empty time in front of me. Tonight and tomorrow and the week after and the next month and down through the years as I never marry and become a dried-up woman. Evenings spent folding paper. Days cleaning someone else's house. Free afternoons spent shopping a bit, stopping in tea shops because my feet hurt. That is what lives *are*, aren't they? Attempts to fill our time with activity designed to prevent us from realizing that there *is* no meaning? I sit at a tiny table the size of a serving platter and watch the boys hum by on their scooters, girls sitting behind them, clutching their waists with one hand, holding their veils with the other, while the ends stream and snap behind them, glittering with the shimmer of gold (this year's fashion).

So I get off the tube and walk to the street where Mardin lives. And I walk up the street past the house. I stop and look at it. The walls are pale yellow stone. I am wearing rose and sky blue, but I have gone out without ribbons on my wrists.

"Diyet," Akhmim says, leaning on the window sill, "you're still sad."

He looks so familiar and it is so easy, as if we do this every evening. "I live a sad life," I say, my voice even. But my heart is pounding. To see him! To talk to him!

"I found your token," he says.

"My token," I repeat, not understanding.

"The flower. I thought today would be your free day so I tried to watch all day. I thought you had come and I missed you." Then he disappears for a moment, and then he is sitting on the window sill, legs and feet outside, and he jumps lightly to the ground.

I take him to a tea shop. People look at us, wondering what a young woman is doing unescorted with a young man. Let them look. "Order what you want," I say, "I have some money."

"Are you happier?" he asks. "You don't look happier, you look tired."

And he looks perfect, as he always does. Have I fallen in love with him precisely because he *isn't* human? I don't care, I feel love, no matter what the reason. Does a reason for a feeling matter? The feeling I have for my mistress may be there only because I am impressed, but the *feeling* is real enough.

"My mistress is kind," I say, looking at the table. His perfect hand, beautiful nails and long fingers, lies there.

"Are you happy?" he asks again.

"Are you?" I ask.

He shrugs. "A harni does not have the right to be happy or unhappy."

"Neither do I," I say.

"That's *your* fault. Why did you do it?" he asks. "Why did you choose to be jessed? You were free." His voice is bitter.

"It's hard to find work in the Nekropolis, and I didn't think I would ever get married."

He shakes his head. "Someone would marry you. And if they didn't, is it so awful not to get married?"

"Is it so awful to be jessed?" I ask.

"Yes."

That is all he says. I suppose to him it looks as if I threw everything away, but how can he understand how our choices are taken from us? He doesn't even understand freedom and what an illusion it really is.

"Run away," he says.

Leave the mistress? I am horrified. "She needs me, she cannot run that house by herself and I have cost her a great deal of money. She has made sacrifices to buy me."

"You could live in the Nekropolis and make funeral wreaths," he urges. "You could talk to whomever you wished and no one would order you around."

"I don't want to live in the Nekropolis," I say.

"Why not?"

"There is nothing there for me!"

"You have friends there."

"I wouldn't if I ran away."

"Make new ones," he says.

"Would you go?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I'm not a person, I can't live."

"What if you could make a living, would you run away?"

"Yes," he says, "yes." He squares his shoulders defiantly and looks at me. "If I could be human, I would be." He is shaming me.

Our tea comes. My face is aflame with color, I don't know what to say. I don't know what to think. He feels morally superior. He thinks he knows the true worth of something I threw away. He doesn't understand, not at all.

"Oh Diyet," he says softly, "I am sorry. I shouldn't say these things to you."

"I didn't think you could have these feelings," I whisper.

He shrugs again. "I can have any feelings," he says. "Harni aren't jessed."

"You told me to think of you as a dog," I remind him. "Loyal."

"I am loyal," he says. "You didn't ask who I was loyal to."

"You're supposed to be loyal to the mistress."

He drums the table with his fingers, *taptaptaptap, taptaptaptap*. "Harni aren't like geese," he says, not looking at me. His earring is golden, he is rich and fine-looking. I had not realized at my new place how starved I had become for fine things. "We don't impress on the first person we see." Then he shakes his head. "I shouldn't talk about all this nonsense. You must go, I must go back before they miss me."

"We have to talk more," I say.

"We have to go," he insists. Then he smiles at me and all the unhappiness disappears from his face. He doesn't seem human anymore, he seems pleasant; *harni*. I get a chill. He is so alien. I understand him less than I understand people like my old mistress. We get up and he looks away as I pay.

Outside Mardin's house I tell him, "I'll come back next Tuesday."

It's good I did so much before, because I sleepwalk through the days. I leave the cleaning machine in the doorway where the mistress almost trips over it. I forget to set the clothes in order. I don't know what to think.

I hear the mistress say to the neighbor, "She is a godsend, but so moody. One day she's doing everything, the next day she can't be counted on to remember to set the table."

What right does she have to talk about me that way? Her house was a pigsty when I came.

What am I thinking? What is wrong with me that I blame my mistress? Where is my head? I feel ill, my eyes water and head fills. I can't breathe, I feel heavy. I must be dutiful. I used to have this feeling once in a while when I was first jessed, it's part of the adjustment. It must be the change. I have to adjust all over again.

I find the mistress, tell her I'm not feeling well, and go lie down.

The next afternoon, just before dinner, it happens again. The day after that is fine, but then it happens at mid-morning of the third day. It is Sunday and I have the afternoon off. I force myself to work through the morning. My voice is hoarse, my head aches. I want to get everything ready since I won't be there to see to dinner in the afternoon. White cheese and olives and tomatoes on a platter. My stomach rebels and I have to run to the bathroom.

What is wrong with me?

I go to the moussin in the afternoon, lugging my bag, which is heavy with paper, and sit in the cool dusty darkness, nursing my poor head. I feel as if I should pray. I should ask for help, for guidance. The moussin is so old that the stone is irregularly worn, and through my slippers I can feel the little ridges and valleys in the marble. Up around the main worship hall there are galleries hidden by arabesques of scrollwork. Kari and I used to sit up there when we were children. Above that, sunlight flashes through clerestory windows. Where the light hits the marble floor it shines hard, hurting my eyes and my head. I rest my forehead on my arm, turned sideways on the bench so I can lean on the back. With my eyes closed I smell incense and my own scent of perfume and perspiration.

There are people there for service, but no one bothers me. Isn't that amazing?

Or maybe it is only because anyone can see that I am impure.

I get tired of my own melodrama. I keep thinking that people are looking at me, that someone is going to say something to me. I don't know where to go.

I don't even pretend to think of going back to my room. I get on the tube and go to Mardin's house. I climb the stairs from the tube—these are newer, but, like the floor of the moussin, they are unevenly worn, sagging in the centers from the weight of this crowded city. What would it be like to cross the sea and go north? To the peninsula, Ida, or north from there, into the continent? I used to want to travel, to go to a place where people had yellow hair, to see whole forests of trees. Cross the oceans, learn other languages. I told Kari that I would even like to taste dog, or swine, but she thought I was showing off. But it's true, once I would have liked to try things.

I am excited, full of energy and purpose. I can do anything. I can understand Fhassin, standing in the street with his razor, laughing. It is worth it, anything is worth it for this feeling of being alive. I have been jessed, I have been asleep for so long.

There are people on Mardin's street. It's Sunday and people are visiting. I stand in front of the house across the street. What am I going to say if someone opens the door? I am waiting to meet a friend. What if they don't leave, what if Akhmim sees them and doesn't come out. The sun bakes my hair, my head. Akhmim, where are you? Look out the window. He is probably waiting on the mistress. Maybe there is a *bismek* party and those women are poisoning Akhmim. They could do anything, they *own* him. I want to crouch in the street and cover my head in my hands, rock and cry like a widow woman from the Nekropolis. Like my mother must have done when my father died. I grew up without a father, maybe that's why I'm so wild. Maybe that's why Fhassin is in prison and I'm headed there. I pull my veil up so my face is shadowed. So no one can see my tears.

Oh my head. Am I drunk? Am I insane? Has the Holy One, seeing my thoughts, driven me mad?

I look at my brown hands. I cover my face.

"Diyet?" He takes my shoulders.

I look up at him, his beautiful familiar face, and I am stricken with terror. What is he? What am I trusting my life, my future to?

"What's wrong," he asks, "are you ill?"

"I'm going insane," I say. "I can't stand it, Akhmim, I can't go back to my room—"

"Hush," he says, looking up the street and down. "You have to. I'm only a harni. I can't do anything, I can't help you."

"We have to go. We have to go away somewhere, you and I."

He shakes his head. "Diyet, please. You must hush."

"You said you wanted to be free," I say. My head hurts so bad. The tears keep coming even though I am not really crying.

"I can't be free," he says. "That was just talk."

"I have to go now," I say. "I'm jessed, Akhmim, it is hard, if I don't go now I'll never go."

"Your mistress—"

"DON'T TALK ABOUT HER!" I shout. If he talks about her I may not be able to leave.

He looks around again. We are a spectacle, a man and a woman on the street.

"Come with me, we'll go somewhere, talk," I say, all honey. He cannot deny me, I see it in him. He has to get off the street. He would go anywhere. Any place is safer than this.

He lets me take him into the tube, down the stairs to the platform. I clutch my indigo veil around my face. We wait in silence, he has his hands in his pockets. He looks like a boy from the Nekropolis, standing there in just his shirt, no outer robe. He looks away, shifts his weight from one foot to the other, ill at ease. So human. Events are making him more human. Taking away all the uncertainties.

"What kind of genes are in you?" I ask.

"What?" he asks.

"What kinds of genes?"

"Are you asking for my chart?" he says.

I shake my head. "Human?"

He shrugs. "Mostly. Some artificial sequences."

"No animal genes," I say. I sound irrational because I can't get clear what I mean. The headache makes my thoughts skip, my tongue thick.

He smiles a little. "No dogs, no monkeys."

I smile back, he is teasing me. I am learning to understand when he teases. "I have some difficult news for you, Akhmim. I think you are a mere human being."

His smile vanishes. He shakes his head. "Diyet," he says. He is about to talk like a father.

I stop him with a gesture. My head still hurts.

The train whispers in, sounding like wind. Oh the lights. I sit down, shading my eyes, and he stands in front of me. I can feel him looking down at me. I look up and smile, or maybe grimace. He smiles back, looking worried. At the Moussin of the White Falcon, we get off. Funny that we are going into a cemetery to live. But only for awhile, I think. Somehow I will find a way we can leave. We'll go north, across the sea, up to the continent, where we'll be strangers. I take him through the streets and stop in front of a row of death houses, like the Lachims', but an inn. I give Akhmim money and tell him to rent us a place for the night. "Tell them your wife is sick," I whisper.

"I don't have any credit. If they take my identification, they'll know," he says.

"This is the Nekropolis," I say. "They don't use credit. Go on. Here you are a man."

He frowns at me but takes the money. I watch him out of the corner of my eye, bargaining, pointing at me. Just pay, I think, even though we have so little money. I just want to lie down, to sleep. And finally he comes out and takes me by the hand and leads me to our place. A tiny place of rough whitewashed walls, a bed, a chair, a pitcher of water and two glasses. "I have something for your head," he says. "The man gave it to me." He smiles ruefully. "He thinks you are pregnant."

My hand shakes when I hold it out. He puts the white pills in my hand and pours a glass of water for me. "I'll leave you here," he says. "I'll go back. I won't tell anyone that I know where you are."

"Then you were lying to me," I say. I don't want to argue, Akhmim, just stay until tomorrow. Then it will be too late. "You said if you could be free, you would. You *are* free."

"What can I do? I can't live," he says in anguish. "I can't get work!"

"You can sell funeral wreaths. I'll make them."

He looks torn. It is one thing to think how you will act, another to be in the situation and do it. And I know, seeing his face, that he really is human, because his problem is a very human problem. Safety or freedom.

"We will talk about it tomorrow," I say. "My head is aching."

"Because you are jessed," he says. "It is so dangerous. What if we don't make enough money? What if they catch us?"

"That is life," I say. I will go to prison. He will be sent back to the mistress. Punished. Maybe made to be conscript labor.

"Is it worth the pain?" he asks in a small voice.

I don't know, but I can't say that. "Not when you have the pain," I say, "but afterward it is."

"Your poor head." He strokes my forehead. His hand is cool and soothing.

"It's all right," I say. "It hurts to be born." ●

MESSENGER

Andrew Weiner

Andrew Weiner's short story "Distant Signals" was recently included in *The Norton Book of Science Fiction.* This anthology was edited by Ursula K. LeGuin and Brian Attebery. It is a collection of the "Best North American Science Fiction, 1960-1990."

art: Beryl Bush

1.

The *Weekly World News* has located Edwin Boone, deep in the Amazon, living in a solar-powered mobile home complete with wet bar, satellite dish, and laser cannon. I learned this at the supermarket checkout counter this morning.

Of course, only last month he was spotted in a bowling alley in Taos, New Mexico. And just a few months before that in a New York gay bar, slow-dancing with Elvis.

He gets around, does Edwin. Meets secretly with the president at Camp David, lunches with an Academy-Award winning actress in Paris, briefs the pope at a Swedish monastery, attends a rock concert in Peking. Unless it's true that he's hiding out on a tiny South Pacific island, building an army of robots that will take over the world.

Of course, Edwin always was the restless sort. He had schedules, like any man in his position. But periodically he would just take off, leaving a trail of broken appointments behind him, to consult a shaman in Lima or a particle physicist in Pasadena, to take in a play in London or a recording session in Prague. He kept a private jet constantly fueled against the moments when such an urge would seize him.

Edwin traveled far and wide even when he was alive. So it seems only fitting that he should travel further and wider now that he is dead. Even further and wider, perhaps, than we might imagine.

2.

It is hard to believe that Edwin Boone has been dead these past seven years. Officially so, at any rate. For some people, it is impossible to believe.

He is dead, and yet he lives on, at least in our imaginations.

This is my standard line when people ask me if Edwin is really dead—a question I heard a lot in the period following his death, and one that I still hear surprisingly often.

People ask me this because I knew Edwin Boone. Not all that well: I'm not sure that anyone, even Edwin, could make that claim. But as well as most people who claimed to know him.

"He'll never die," I say, in answer to these questions. "Not as long as he holds a place in our imaginations."

He still holds a place in mine. I find myself thinking of him standing in that mushroom patch in the shadow of the radio telescope at Arecibo, babbling on about messages from beyond the stars. Or chewing on a cheeseburger at a Burger King in a suburban strip mall, talking about his plans to maintain agricultural yields in the face of UV damage. "Indoor farming in surplus office buildings. Bring the farms downtown. We'll hire marijuana growers to show us how."

That was our first meeting, the one at Burger King. Arecibo came later. Only then did I realize that Edwin Boone was several tiles short of a full roof. Previously, I had thought him merely eccentric. But by then I was already in far too deep.

3.

I was working on a piece for *Discover* magazine about domestic robotics when the telephone rang.

"You got it wrong," the voice on the telephone said.

"Wrong?"

"About SETI."

My piece on new developments in the Search for Extraterrestial Intelligence had appeared in the *Times Magazine* the previous Sunday.

"Of course," he said, "everybody does. You did a good job, otherwise."

"Who is this?"

"Edwin Boone."

"Edwin Boone?"

This must, I thought, be some kind of joke. Edwin Boone! The most celebrated American inventor since Edison. Holder of hundreds of patents, including the Boone Vorticular Coil, a source of almost-limitless, almost-free energy that had revolutionized power generation. Head of a vast industrial empire. One of the wealthiest human beings alive. I could think of no reason why Edwin Boone would be calling an obscure freelance science journalist.

"Yes," he said, as if in explanation. "I've always been interested in SETI. You might say that it's where I got my start. Listen, are you doing anything for lunch?"

Of course I jumped at the opportunity to meet him. Even at Burger King, a venue I supposed that he chose for its anonymity. Actually, he liked the food.

Although nearing fifty, Edwin Boone was still boyish in his enthusiasms for junk food and trashy novels and garish music. When I arrived, he was eating a burger with evident enthusiasm, meanwhile reading a book with a spaceship on the cover and listening to decades-out-of-date heavy metal music on his mini-CD player. He was dressed in a bright yellow jogging suit. His sparse hair was standing up on end.

And so he told me how I was wrong about SETI, although his objections made very little sense to me.

"You've bought it," he told me. "That whole Big Science party line. The assumption that extraterrestial lifeforms would try to communicate with us through technological means. I mean, if that's the best they can do, screw them."

"The best they can do?"

"Don't you see? It would mean that they're as primitive as us. So who wants to talk to them anyway?"

"But how else would they communicate with us?"

He wiped ketchup from his mouth with a paper napkin.

"You're thinking like a scientist," he said. "That's the whole problem with science journalism. You ought to be keeping us on our toes, not bowing down and kissing them."

"Us?"

"Used to be an astronomer myself. Gave it up a long time ago. But I'm still a scientist, in my own way."

He hadn't answered my question, but at the time I failed to notice. Indeed, I was almost relieved as the conversation moved on to ozone depletion and crop diebacks and indoor farming, to Martian terraforming and DNA enhancement, to trends in global pop music.

He was a fascinating conversationalist, well-informed and lucid, although given to dizzying leaps in logic. But that was only to be expected. The man was a genius, after all. He had to be, to invent something like the Boone Vorticular Coil. Even if he couldn't explain how it worked.

A device to capture geomagnetic energy, that was how he described it on the original patent. But ten years later, scientists were no closer to understanding how it did that, or even *if* it did that. The Boone Coil produced a rotational field that captured energy, vast quantities of it. But no one knew where it really came from. It was simply "emergent energy," there for the taking.

"The Boone Coil . . . " I asked him, toward the end of our lunch. "Where do you think the energy comes from?"

"No idea."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Well, okay, sure. Of course I have an idea. But I promised not to say."

"Promised who?"

"My partners."

In launching his invention, Boone had teamed up with a syndicate of electrical utilities. They had given him the legal and financial muscle he needed to fight off the blizzard of restraining orders and environmental impact studies whipped up by the frantic oil and nuclear industries.

"Surely it can't matter now?"

"Perhaps not." He stared at me with his watery blue eyes. "Off the record?"

"Off the record."

"Hyperspace."

I blinked slowly, stupidly. "What?"

"You get the rotational field just so, you open up a gateway to hyperspace. Energy cascades on down from a higher level. Another dimension, most likely. Of course, I can't prove that."

I waited for him to crack a smile. None came.

"Tesla," he said. "I think he was on to the same thing."

"Nicola Tesla? The inventor of alternating current?"

"The same. You know, Tesla figured out how to transmit wireless electricity over twenty, twenty-five miles. We're talking eighty years ago and more. But the oil industry got to him, shut him right down. Poor bastard went mad. Or did he?"

"I don't know," I said. "Did he?"

"Started saying that he got his ideas from angels. Or aliens. But then again, who's to say?"

4.

My lunch with Edwin Boone was worth fifteen hundred words in *New York* magazine: *Munching Whoppers with the New Edison*. What I wrote was mostly a personality piece, focusing more on Boone's fondness for fast food, his fabulous wealth, and his views on the arts ("*You can't beat a Clint Eastwood western*") than on his scientific achievements.

To flesh out the article, I searched through the business data bases. Boone's holdings, the numbered companies and wholly-owned subsidiaries, the joint ventures and limited partnerships and offshore holding companies, were mind-numbing in their complexity. But as I tracked them, I stumbled across a curious pattern. Almost all roads led, eventually, to the same destination, a charitable foundation, the Boone Research Institute. In recent years, a larger and larger share of the profits of Boone's other holdings had been flowing into it.

There were some tax advantages to this arrangement, although fewer than you might expect. Mainly the Institute seemed to exist to spend Boone's money on a bewildering array of projects: software development; Saharan solar farms; a satellite network featuring commercial-free worldbeat music broadcasts called UnBabel; designs for electrically powered airplanes; computer-enhancement of NASA photographs of anomalous formations on the Martian surface; an investigation of psychotropic plants in the Brazilian rain forest; a long-term psychological study of UFO abductees.

There had been little publicity about this Institute. Neither had Boone mentioned it to me. But this did not stop me speculating about it in my article. Clearly it was close to his heart. By my crude calculations, the Boone Research Institute had spent over ten billion dollars in the past five years.

"Boone remains close-mouthed about the activities of his foundation," I wrote. *"But it seems clear that the man who has already sparked one scientific revolution in his own lifetime is intent on starting another."*

If this sounds like hagiography, it was. I was in awe of Edwin Boone, and remain so, although perhaps not for the same reasons.

I omitted all mention of his theory about energy from hyperspace. Even if I had not promised him confidentiality on the subject, I would have passed over it. Not only was it preposterous, it made the man sound like a loon, which he clearly was not. Edwin Boone was eccentric, yes. But he was anything but crazy. How could he be, and achieve so much?

How could he be?

5.

My article appeared and disappeared, in the way of all articles. I heard nothing from Edwin Boone. Neither did I expect to.

I ghosted a book on back pain for a fashionable doctor. I took an eco-vacation in Costa Rica with my girlfriend and reported on it for a travel magazine. I covered the European space mission. I scripted a show on migraine for PBS. I wrote a brochure for a pharmaceutical company.

And then Edwin Boone called again.

"Leonard?" he said. "Not bad. Although I had the bacon double-cheeseburger, not the Whopper. Artistic license, I suppose."

"You just read the article?"

It was more than a year since it had appeared.

"Just re-read it. Wanted to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

"You doing anything this afternoon? There's something that might interest you. I'll send a driver."

The something-that-might-interest-me turned out to be a recording session in a mid-town studio, featuring a slight young Moroccan woman with a piercing voice. Edwin owned the studio, and the recording company, a small independent label with an eclectic artistic roster, ranging from electronic music to rap to raga, that had never earned him a cent. That was about to change, thanks to the Moroccan singer, whose professional name was Ayesha, and who would shortly become an international sensation, as well as Edwin Boone's third wife.

"Isn't she fabulous?" he asked, as we watched from behind the glass.

He had met her himself only that morning, having signed her up and flown her to New York on the basis of Arabic music videos. There was as yet nothing between them. But their future was perhaps already apparent in the glances they exchanged through the glass, in his rapturous expression as she sang.

I had little interest in popular music. But I could see that Edwin was on to something here.

"Jajouka-rock," he said. "Next big thing."

I wondered if that was why he had brought me here, to hear this revelation. Perhaps he had mixed me up with some rock critic of his acquaintance. But after sitting through several more takes, he got up suddenly.

"Virtual Death," he said.

Was that the name of a song? A heavy metal band? I stared at him blankly.

"I'm expected over there at three for the try-out. Come on. You can try it, too."

"Try what?"

"Virtual Death."

6.

Boone's driver took us out of the city, toward Connecticut. Along the way Boone worked his way through a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken and played industrial-house music from England on the car's sound system at full volume.

"Sounds like the end of the world, doesn't it?" he yelled. "Have you noticed, lately, that so much music sounds like that?"

I had not noticed.

"That's because it is," he shouted.

"Is what?" I screamed back.

"The end, almost." He cranked down the volume a notch and gestured out the car window. "We can feel it. Feel it out there, waiting for us. That big quantum beach where all the waves break, past and future, all the possibilities collapsing into this gigantic singularity at the end of space-time. You follow?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly."

"But what can you do?" It was a rhetorical question. "What can you do except keep on surfing?"

This was, I would realize later, a typical bit of Boone-patter. He would say these things not so much because he believed them (although when he was saying them, no doubt he did believe them), but to try them out, to see how the words fell together, what unexpected new patterns he might produce. It was as if he was already in rehearsal for his forthcoming career as a supersalesperson of interstellar apocalypse.

We arrived, eventually, at an anonymous-looking industrial park, drawing up in front of a spartan office building, headquarters of Thanatos Software Inc.

Virtual Death was the first product of Thanatos Software, a firm started with money provided by one of Boone Industries' venture capital funds. Virtual Death was a virtual-reality simulation of the Near-Death Experience. Boone offered me the chance to take a test run, but I declined.

"You don't know what you're missing," he told me, as he settled under the hood of a Frankensteinlike apparatus.

Afterward he raved about the tunnel, the angels, the cities of light.

"Will people really want to buy that?" I asked, as the car headed back to the city.

"Some people, sure," Boone said. He was playing with an *I Ching* program on the car's terminal, and we were surrounded by the sounds of a tinkling waterfall. "That's not exactly the point."

"What is the point?"

"To check it out," he said. "To check it all out. Death, drugs, UFO experiences. To find the pipeline." He leaned forward, grunted with satisfaction. "*Approaching Spring*. That's good. That's real good."

"What pipeline?"

But he was already intent on following his moving lines into the next hexagram.

7.

It was late afternoon when we arrived at our final destination for the day, Boone's private office at the local branch of Boone Industries.

Edwin Boone's head offices were in Los Angeles. I doubt that he set foot in his New York office more than twice a year. And still, it was spectacular: a miniature Japanese garden with a waterfall under a domed skylight, a huge Henry Moore sculpture, a breathtaking art collection.

"Props," Boone said, as he saw me staring at a famous Mondrian painting. "But pretty ones, aren't they?"

"Props?"

"It's all props," he said. He gestured, as though to take in his office, the entire building. "All stagecraft. You want people to take you seriously, you've got to operate in the real world, like a real business."

"How do you mean 'like a real business'? Boone Industries *is* a real business."

"The only *real* business is the Institute. The rest is just window-dressing. Most people think the Institute is some kind of scam, but actually it's the other way around. The Institute is what it's really about. It's time to make that clear."

"Should I be taking notes?" I asked.

"Yes. But not yet."

"You want me to write another article?"

"I want to write a book, Len. A book wants to write me. I want to tell the whole story. Lay it all out. No punches pulled. So, are you in? Will you write my book for me?"

"Why?"

"Because I can't write."

"No. I mean, why me?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe you remind me a little of me, the way I used to be. Rational, scientific, uptight . . . aaagh! Point is, I need someone like you, for balance. To hold me back a little. Stop me shooting right off the edge of the world."

8.

Contracts were drawn up, schedules coordinated. A month later a car came to take me to the airport, where I embarked on Edwin Boone's private jet. I brought with me two portable recorders, and several hundred hours of tape.

Edwin was sitting up front with the pilot, discussing the flight plan.

"Puerto Rico?" I asked. "I thought we were heading for St. Lucia."

The plan was for us to spend two weeks at Edwin's vacation complex, taping his recollections.

"Afterward," he said. "There's something I want you to see."

He wanted me to see the radio telescope at Arecibo, the world's largest. I had read about it, but never seen it.

"Here," he said, as we got out of the limo and gazed up at the giant dish, "is where it all began."

"What began?"

"People will think I'm crazy when they read this. But then, they already do." He cackled with glee. "Either that, or they think I'm some kind of genius. But the truth is I'm acting under instructions."

"Instructions?"

"I used to work here," he said. "I was an astronomer, just graduated. I was working on SETI. But I was working on it the wrong way."

"The wrong way?"

"With *machines*, Len. And search protocols. And statistical analyses. I was like a machine myself. Chewing up the data and spitting it out. I didn't drink, didn't have a girlfriend, didn't do anything but work. Every day I would come here and not even see the mushrooms."

"Mushrooms?"

"In the field," he said. "Right in the shadow of the telescope."

He led me out into the field, where cows grazed, regarding us incuriously. "Watch your step," he warned, just as I trod on a cow pat.

"Yuck," I said, trying to clean my shoe on the grass.

"Don't knock it," Edwin told me. "No manure, no mushrooms. Ah, there . . . " Triumphantly, he reached down and plucked a mushroom from the ground, and cradled it in his hand. *"Psilocybe cubensis."*

"I'm sorry?" Botany had never been one of my strengths.

"A psilocybin mushroom," he said, patiently. "What some people call a magic mushroom."

He held out the mushroom to me. I took it and examined it. It smelled of cow dung.

"One day I saw them, finally," he said. "I had been working an all-nighter, trying to track a signal from Tau Ceti that turned out to be another artifact, and I came out at dawn for some air. I was exhausted, I was fed up-to-here with SETI, I didn't believe it could work anymore, that there was anyone out there talking to us, I was ready to give up the whole thing and go home. And I saw the mushrooms growing in the field. And I plucked one. And . . . I chewed it."

"You knew it was a psilocybin mushroom?"

"I didn't know shit about drugs. But it seemed like the thing to do. It was like it said to me, *Eat me."*

"Wasn't that dangerous? I mean, it could have been poisonous."

"Oh, it was dangerous all right. But somehow I knew that it wouldn't kill me. That it would make me stronger. . . ."

I looked in dismay from the mushroom in my hand to Edwin Boone and back to the mushroom.

"People ask me where I get my ideas," he said. "*This* is where I got them. The Boone Coil first, and then all the others."

"From the mushroom?"

"Don't think of it as a mushroom. Think of it more as an organic galactic radio."

Think of it as an organic galactic radio. This was, surely, my cue to make a rapid exit. Later, I would wonder why I did not choose that moment to flee. Instead I stood there frozen, open-mouthed.

"Very interesting chemical structure, psilocybin. Becomes psilocin when it enters the body, which is 4 hydroxy dimethyltryptamine. It's the only 4-substituted indole in organic nature. You find it in these mushrooms and about another eighty types of fungi. Except I don't think it's organic at all. I think it's designed. Some kind of virus program seeded into the genome."

"Seeded by who?"

"By our friends. Our alien friends."

9.

"To end our alienation," Boone was saying, "we have to become the alien. Reconnect with our unconscious collectivity as a species, and through that, with the universal mind."

We were walking along the cliffs at his St. Lucia retreat, the same cliffs from which he would later plummet to his death. I wasn't really listening. Boone had been talking to me for four days now. Or rather, talking *at* me, morning, noon, and night, with occasional breaks for food and sleep. I couldn't listen anymore. I didn't need to listen, since I was getting it all down on tape. But I would have to listen to it when I attempted to get it down on paper, a prospect I regarded with increasing dread.

The sunset had come and gone, and it was growing dark. I realized that Boone had stopped talking. He was staring up into the sky.

"Look," he said.

I saw a faint flashing light. "At that airplane, you mean?"

We could hear the engine, now, as the plane began its descent.

"Airplane? Oh, so it is." He sounded disappointed.

"What were you expecting? A flying saucer?"

He didn't laugh at my joke.

"You see things in the sky here. Lights that are not airplanes. Strange lights. Apparently they've been seen more than ever since I built this house. Or so the locals say."

"And why would that be, Edwin?"

"Because they're watching me, I guess. Waiting for me. And one day they will come for me. When my work here is over."

I shook my head slightly.

Edwin Boone had been eating magic mushrooms almost every day of his adult life, even while building his business empire. Or so he had told me, and I had no reason to doubt it. For years his head had been buzzing with every crazy idea known to humanity, and a few he had invented himself. Now, he was at last ready to unleash those ideas on the world. And I was his chosen conduit.

Should I have been surprised that he was expecting to take a ride on a UFO? By now, nothing he said could surprise me.

"Coming for you," I said. "In a spaceship, you mean?"

He waved his hand dismissively. "Nothing so crude, so mechanical. . . . Although if you had a crude mechanical mind, I suppose it might appear to you as a spaceship."

10.

Edwin dropped me off in New York on his way to Houston. He was going to lobby NASA for more detailed study of the Martian landscape of Cydonia—the location of the so-called "Face on Mars"—in the next Mars Observer mission. I went home to work on the first draft of his book.

I faced a difficult task. I did not believe that psilocybin mushrooms had been seeded on Earth by friendly aliens. I did not believe that it was possible to gain cosmic wisdom by chewing them. I did not believe that energy could be sucked up from hyperspace. I did not believe that there was a face on Mars. I did not believe in UFOs. I did not believe in hundreds of things. But I did believe, somehow, in Edwin Boone.

He was an extraordinary man whose story needed to be told. But told in a sober, balanced way, one that would enhance his stature rather than invite unnecessary ridicule.

The book I wrote traced the story of his life, from dreamy backyard astronomer to struggling inventor to industrial tycoon. It dealt, although briefly and delicately, with his experiences with psilocybin mushrooms. It included moderate doses of his personal philosophy. It described the work of the Boone Research Institute as one of "preparing humanity for contact with the stars," without going into excessive detail about some of its more bizarre projects.

The book was well-balanced, readable, a reasonably faithful portrait of a fascinating individual.

Edwin hated it.

"This isn't me," he told me, whacking the manuscript with the palm of his hand.

We were having a drink in the study of his house in Malibu. Edwin was wearing a white tuxedo. He was about to be married to Ayesha. The wedding would take place on the grounds of his estate. He had tried to get Timothy Leary or Terence McKenna to perform the ceremony, but both had previous engagements, so he had settled for a local Wiccan priestess. The Grateful Dead would play at the reception.

"I don't recognize this person at all," he said, delivering a final blow to the manuscript that sent the upper pages flying across the room. "I mean, who is it? Gary Cooper? Jimmy Stewart? It sure isn't me."

I had never seen him so angry. In fact, I had never seen him angry at all.

"I'm no *hero,"* he said. "I'm no *genius*. I've told you that a thousand times. I'm a messenger boy, Len. And I've got to get my message through."

"I thought that was what you wanted from me. Something balanced."

"Balanced, maybe. Not buried in bullshit. Tell the story, Len. Tell the *whole* story."

11.

I wrote it the way he wanted it.

According to our contract, I was to get a *with Leonard Shine* credit on the book, along with half the royalties. I thought about taking my name off it. The book would do me no good at all among the scientists I would need to interview for future assignments, if they were to read it. But my guess was that almost no one would want to read it. Besides, it *was* my work, for better or worse. I left my name on the book.

My guess was wrong. The hard-cover printing of *Destiny: The Edwin Boone Story* quickly sold out, mainly to business people anxious to fathom the mind of Edwin Boone. The paperback was bought by millions, and read and discussed everywhere. There were not too many multi-billionaires with pop star wives who talked openly of communicating with aliens. It was, to put it mildly, a sensation.

The movie version of *Destiny* ended with Edwin's meeting with aliens, and his ascent to the stars. It was the summer blockbuster of the year.

I was offered the opportunity to do the novelization of the movie, but turned it down. Fiction had no appeal for me. And, following the success of Edwin's book, I had found a new career as a ghost-writer of celebrity autobiographies. Some of my clients were quite interesting, although none were so interesting as Edwin Boone. Fortunately.

12.

I did not see Edwin for several years, although we talked on the phone from time to time, and I followed his progress from afar. He had largely withdrawn from his business activities to concentrate on his Institute, which bankrolled bigger and ever-more-harebrained-sounding projects.

Biggest and most harebrained of all was the design of an interstellar spaceship to be powered by the Boone Coil.

He had also become a fixture on the lecture circuit, preaching his gospel of alien contact around the world, simultaneously revered and reviled. He was scorned by intellectuals ("*a cosmic Ross Perot, an extroverted Howard Hughes, a New Age loon*" read one of his more favorable notices), adored by people who read supermarket tabloids. Ayesha often accompanied him on these tours, opening the shows with her unearthly music.

Edwin's message was sometimes contradictory, but ultimately consistent. Sometimes the aliens would come to visit us, and sometimes we would go to them. Sometimes we would see them in visions, and sometimes in death. Sometimes they would appear to us as angels and sometimes as elves and sometimes as little grey men. But one way or another, we would meet them. And when we did, it would be the end of the world, at least in one sense, and perhaps in every sense.

And then one day he called. "I need a favor," he said.

He was re-working his will. He wanted to name me as a co-executor with Ayesha, with special responsibility for continuing the work of the Boone Research Institute.

"Are you sick, Edwin?"

"Never felt better."

"Then why a new will?"

"Just getting prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

"All contingencies," he said. "So, will you do it?"

"Look after your Institute? Get humanity ready for contact with the stars? But I don't *believe* all that. I don't believe *any* of it."

"You believed in it when you wrote the book."

"No, I didn't. Not for a moment."

"I'm not so sure. But belief isn't a requirement. Just honesty. And friendship."

I sighed. "All right, Edwin," I said. "I'll help run your Institute."

13.

Edwin sent a car and a plane to get me to St. Lucia, where he was holed up with a squadron of lawyers, drawing up the necessary paperwork.

I was a beneficiary of Edwin Boone's will, to the tune of two million dollars. Ayesha would get a hundred million dollars. There were various other bequests. But the vast bulk of the estate would go to the Boone Research Institute.

Both Ayesha and I were made aware of these provisions. Both of us would briefly be suspects, following his death. Both of us had alibis.

The papers were duly signed and notarized, and the lawyers departed. Ayesha left with them, on her way to meet a concert commitment in Cairo. I stayed on, to work on the preface to the new edition of *Destiny,* scheduled for the fall.

In fact we got little work done. Edwin seemed restless, preoccupied, jumpy.

"Write it any way you want it," he said, after a fruitless session. "Just send it to the publisher. I don't need to see it."

"But it's your book, Edwin. How am I supposed to know what you want to say?"

"It will come to you."

He got up and crossed to the window, stared out at the night sky.

"It's going to be soon," he said.

"What's going to be soon?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

14.

Edwin seemed in better spirits the next day. We played tennis, sailed in his boat. After dinner, we watched a batch of Ayesha's new videos. Then Louie, Edwin's personal chef, tuned the satellite dish to the BBC World Service, to pick up the play at Wimbledon. Sandra, Edwin's administrative assistant, joined us. We watched together for awhile. Then Edwin stood up.

"I'm going out for a walk," he said.

A warm breeze blew in as he opened the glass door to the patio. We watched him stroll out into the Caribbean night, and it seemed to me that he glanced up, briefly, into the sky before walking on toward the cliffs. Then I looked back to the game.

He never returned.

Later we searched for him, searched every inch of the house and grounds. Then the local police did the same. But no trace of Edwin could be found anywhere, excepting only for his golfing hat, which washed up on the beach the next day. He had not been wearing the hat when he left the house, but perhaps it had been in his pocket. Louie thought so, although Sandra was not so sure.

In the end, they put it down as an accident, although there were many who found it hard to believe that he could simply have slipped and fallen off the cliff edge he had walked so surely in the past. It was too flat an explanation, too banal. Edwin Boone was a genius, a self-made billionaire, a celebrated crank, a certified media superstar, one of the most fabulous human beings alive. He deserved a better death.

There were whispers about suicide, although it was hard to imagine why Edwin Boone would take his own life. He was in apparent good health, his many businesses were booming, he was a continuing fount of new ideas and new projects. It was true that, close to the end, he made remarks to his immediate associates about it being "time to move on," to "find new worlds," to "kick it up to the next level." But these remarks were so vague as to lend themselves to a variety of interpretations.

There was talk of kidnapping, too, and at first the federal agents gave this theory some credence. But Edwin's compound was well-defended, there were no signs of forced entry, and no ransom note ever materialized.

Some believed that he had been murdered, by business rivals or foreign governments, radical groups or the CIA, satanists or evangelists, vast conspiracies or crazed lone assassins. There was no shortage of people who might have wanted Edwin dead. But again, there was no evidence of foul play.

And some believed that he had not died at all, that he had faked his own death. He had done so to escape the pressures of his work, to research a cure for cancer, to join a monastic order, to plot the overthrow of the U.S. government, or to join his alien friends, as foreshadowed in the movie of his life.

For these people, Edwin lives on still, at least in their imaginations. And perhaps even beyond them.

15.

I was interrogated intensively by local police, then by federal agents. I answered the questions as honestly as I could, up to a certain point, and the story I told was consistent with the testimony of Louie and Sandra.

Probably they were too intent on watching the game to see the strange light that flickered briefly through the glass of the patio door, about an hour after Edwin had left us. Or else, like me, they preferred to keep quiet about it.

There was a light in the sky, and I glanced up, and I heard . . . what? A beating of wings, or perhaps, just possibly, the whirring of helicopter blades. And then the light was gone, and the sound with it, and I looked back to the TV.

At the time I thought nothing of it. Afterward I decided not to talk about it. It would not do me or Edwin any good.

16.

After a suitable interval, Edwin was declared officially dead. The will was probated, and I took up my new duties as director of the Boone Research Institute.

It's interesting work. The space drive is coming along surprisingly well, and according to new data, there really *does* seem to be a face on Mars. Virtual Death has been joined on the software sales charts by Virtual Abduction—The UFO Experience. The Brazilian rain forest scan has turned up a half dozen exciting new pharmaceuticals, and we're all thrilled about the success of the UnBabel network.

Ayesha was very supportive of the work, taking on some of the promotional chores once handled by Edwin, sitting through endless dull directors' meetings, advising me on what Edwin would have done, helping me get through the first few difficult years. I have missed her greatly since her disappearance, from her boat anchored off Athens. The cause of her death remains a mystery to this day, and there are those who like to believe that she went to join Edwin. But that is another story, and one told frequently enough elsewhere.

17.

Edwin called me a week ago. At least, I believed that it was Edwin at the time, although I have since had second thoughts.

"You're doing a terrific job," he said, without preamble. "Just gangbusters. But I knew you would come through."

It was a bad connection, crackly and distant-sounding, but I recognized the voice immediately.

"Edwin? Is that you?"

"Absolutely."

"Where are you? Where have you been?"

"It's fabulous," he said. "It's everything I dreamed, and more."

"What's fabulous?"

"Ayesha sends her love. We're both looking forward to seeing you."

"Seeing me?"

"When the time comes."

"You're going to send a car?"

"Better than a car."

"No," I said. "I don't think I'm ready for that."

"But you *will* be."

"When the time comes."

"Exactly."

There was a loud burst of static on the line, and then the connection went dead.

Was it really Edwin? I could have sworn that it was. But later, in the cold light of day, my doubts returned. It *was* a very bad connection. It could well have been a hoax. Or a product of my own imagination. That would be the most logical explanation, certainly.

And yet, when I walk home from the Institute at night, I find myself glancing up into the sky. And listening, sometimes, for the beating of wings. ●

HEERE THERE BEE MONSTYRES

I've sailed my way into middle age,
beating back and forth along
familiar coastlines, facing
familiar hazards, knowing always
that over one shoulder or the other
lies Pine Bluff, Gull Island,
Narrow Point, whenever my eye
needs them . . . and now you show me
compass and sextant with which
to journey beyond the Pillars
of Hercules into the endless
Atlantic, saying, "Go now:
you have all that you need—
your desire, your fear, your tools."

—David Lunde

REDEMPTION IN THE QUANTUM REALM

Frederik Pohl

Frederik Pohl's most recent novel, *The Voices of Heaven*, will be out soon from Tor. His next book is a sequel to his classic novel *Man Plus*. *Mars Plus* was written with Thomas T. Thomas. It will be published by Baen Books later this year.

art: Laurie Harden

Transcript of interview with Arthur John Delaporte, Ph.D.

When I first met Jeremy Burskin I was Science Master at the Buckingham School in Warwick, Massachusetts. He was one of my students.

I was then twenty-nine years old and recently married. The marriage did not last—Madge divorced me a couple of years later—but at the time I felt that I needed that job. I'm sure you know of Buckingham. It's a prep school of the kind where Daddy enters your name for it the day after you're born. For most of the hundred and forty years of its existence Buck Prep had concentrated on the classics. They'd dropped Greek from the curriculum only ten years earlier and they had never had a science master before I got there. But there was a new Headmaster, Rev. John E. Abernathy, and he was a new broom determined to sweep clean.

At my final interview he explained his intentions to me. "By the time our chaps go on to their universities I want them to be fully prepared for the technological world they will live their lives in, Delaporte. I want them to be fully numerate and science-literate. Are you the man who can make them so?"

"I think so, Headmaster," I said.

He picked a pipe from the rack on his desk and began gouging it out with a tool on his keyring; it made a nasty fingernails-on-the-blackboard noise. He looked up at me in a challenging way. "I don't want you to limit yourself to the rudiments of old-fashioned classical science, levers and test tubes and all that sort of thing. I want you to take our boys right to the cutting edge. I've had this out with our new mathematics master, and he understands that his curriculum must not end with algebra and geometry. I believe he has already instilled the rudiments of calculus into our sixth formers, and by the beginning of the Easter term his classes will be dealing with fractals and chaos theory. I've seen to it that they are already provided with computers for every student."

When he paused again I thought I'd better say something. "That seems very wise, Headmaster."

"I expect no less from you. Relativity, quantum mechanics, cosmology, recombinant DNA—perhaps I should mention that I myself am a subscriber to both *Scientific American* and *Natural History*—I want every Buck grad to understand the principles that underlie all these matters. Oh, not as a specialist might, of course; they're only boys, after all. But I insist that they have at least a grounding in the basics. Enough to whet their interest, Delaporte. Enough to get them started. Thirty years from now I want to see at least one Old Buck as a Nobel laureate—along with those other graduates who will honor us as leaders of industry, heads of great universities and, very likely, among the statesmen who will lead our country. I look to you to make that possible, Delaporte. That will be your principal charge here, although you will also, of course, take your regular rota with coaching the sports teams, overseeing the dormitories, and leading morning chapel. I welcome you to Buckingham."

I don't suppose I have to say that teaching greasy teenagers was not what I had in mind when I was working toward my doctorate in physics. It was just the best I could get, once my post-doc ran out and there was no funding for a permanent position.

Buck Prep did have its advantages, though. One of the best things about the position was the little cottage that went with it. That charmed Madge, at least at first, and so I really did my best to hold the job. I think I did pretty well, as a matter of fact, though there's really no way you can teach everything the Head wanted to a bunch of seventeen-year-olds who've never had a science class before. I came close, though. I stole a couple of ideas from a Triple-A-S program designed for ghetto kids whose schools weren't any good, like doing electrophoresis with strips of wet newspaper and different colored M&Ms—I had to buy the M&Ms out of my own pocket, because there wasn't any budget for "experimental materials." I explained wave-particle duality to them. I showed them how Einstein had demonstrated that light was composed of particles by the way a photon knocked electrons loose from the right kind of metals—the basis for the photoelectric cell—and then I showed them how they could prove to themselves that it was also a wave. (The way you do that is by holding two fingers very close together an inch in front of your eyes; the vertical lines you see between your knuckles are interference fringes, which of course are only possible for waves.)

I think the boys liked me. They seemed to enjoy the class; they even did their homework. When Madge and I had them over for tea on every second Sunday—that was another of the Head's ideas; I think he'd seen *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* too many times in his youth—they charmed Madge with their good nature and fresh young high spirits. That was good, because it made it easier for me to charm her, too, at least for a while. Everything seemed to be going fine until right after the Christmas holidays, when the senior runner came up to me as the class was ending, touching his school cap and informing me that the Head would be grateful if I could step over to his study when convenient.

The Head wasn't alone. Sitting next to him in front of the fireplace was Dr. Fabian, the school chaplain, looking displeased. "Do sit down, Delaporte," the Head said heartily. "Tea? I'll be Mother. You're two lumps and no milk if I remember correctly?"

The fact that they were drinking tea meant that it was to be a discussion, not an execution, but as soon as I had my teacup balanced on my knee the Head opened up. "It's young Burskin," he said. "Dr. Fabian said he's been making atheistic remarks. Some of the other boys are taking them seriously."

"Good heavens," I said.

The chaplain was glaring at me. "He blames it on you," he said. "He says you've proved scientifically that there's no God."

"Impossible! Certainly not! I give you my word there has never been any discussion of religion in my class—"

"Of course there hasn't," the Head soothed. "If there had been I'm sure you would have made it clear that religion is a matter of inspired faith and science a question of measurable fact. They are two quite separate realms and there is no conflict between them, is there? No, we're agreed on that; but, all the same, I can't have parents coming to me with fears that Buck Prep is spreading doubt. You'd better have a word with Burskin."

Although Buck Prep was highly traditional in most ways, it did not permit caning. I sometimes regretted that. It meant that when I had to call a boy in for some fault he knew that the worst that was likely to happen to him was a hundred extra lines or, at worst, being campused on the next weekend.

When I let Burskin into the cottage his expression was serious but not intimidated. "Sir?" he said. "You wish to see me?"

I sat down but kept him standing. It was not a social occasion, and I got right to the point. "Why did you tell McIlwraith and Gorman that I've been proving that God does not exist?"

"But you have, sir, haven't you? I mean, I don't *think* I got it wrong. It was when you were telling us about Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. You talked about that cat of Mr. Schrödinger's; the one that was in a box? With some poison gas that might or might not kill it? Then you said that as long as the cat was in the closed box it could be either alive or dead, but the minute anyone observed it it had to be one or the other; I made a note of it at the time, you called it 'the collapse of the wave function.' Isn't that right?"

I was aware of Madge listening from the bedroom. It made me sterner than I might otherwise have been. "Don't put words in my mouth, Burskin. You know perfectly well that I said nothing at all about God."

"No, sir," he agreed, "not directly. But you said that was true of all particles. Like an electron. You said as long as the electron looked like a wave it could be anywhere—that was what Mr. Niels Bohr said, wasn't it? I mean, I got that right, didn't I, sir? But as soon as the electron was observed it became a particle and was only in one particular place after that, because then the wave function would collapse."

"Yes?"

"But they haven't all collapsed, have they, sir?"

"Of course not."

"Well, sir, the way it looked to me, they should have. They've been observed, if what Chaplain tells us is right. I mean observed by God, sir. He's supposed to observe everything, isn't he, even the sparrow's fall? He's omniscient, that's what Chaplain says. So if there really was a God, he would have observed all those wave functions and they would have collapsed long ago, wouldn't they? Only they haven't. I only drew the logical conclusions."

Transcript of interview with Franklin R. Burskin, M.D.

The fact that I was Jerry's big brother didn't mean we were close. There was six years between us. By the time he was out of kindergarten I was already off at Buckingham Prep, and by the time he got to Buck I was in my freshman year at Harvard.

Of course I heard about the way he wised off at Buck, but I didn't pay much attention. I was in my third year of medical school by then. I did manage to get home for a weekend during the spring break while Jerry was there. Mom was doing her best to forget about the whole thing. Dad wasn't. He'd had to go up to Buck to plead with the Head and he was still sore about it. "Talk sense to your brother," he ordered me. "Take my car. Take him out for a soda or something. Get him out of my sight."

Jerry was willing enough to get out of the house. I picked up a six-pack at the 7-Eleven and we sat in Dad's car with the motor running and the air conditioner going, popping brews. "You came goddam close to being expelled," I told him. "That's pretty stupid. You know Dad's having business troubles. He doesn't need this from you."

He gave me a cocky look. "Relax, big brother. I've got it all straightened out."

"Bullshit. They don't keep atheists at Buck Prep."

"What makes you think I'm an atheist? Nobody at Buck says I am. Even old asshole Fabian took it back once I explained it to him."

"Explain it to me, then."

He popped another can and did. Or tried. I didn't know much about this quantum stuff, but when he told me about sitting down with the Chaplain and the Head and this new science geek, Delaporte, I had to admire his nerve. "I just played the Head's words back to him, Frankie. Religion's about faith, science is about observation. Then I got bright. I said God probably didn't have to peek into the atomic nucleus to see what the particles were doing—hell, He created them in the first place, right? So the observer problem didn't matter."

"They bought that?"

"The Head did. He wanted to. It fit right in with the way he was running the school."

I mulled that over. "So what you're saying is that God's kind of nearsighted?"

He stopped in the middle of lighting a cigarette; even though the air was running I'd already rolled the windows down so the smoke wouldn't stay in Dad's car. "Where do you get that idea?"

"What you said. He sees everything that happens except the really little things that He doesn't bother with."

"Well, that's one way to look at it," he said after a moment. Then he was quiet for a long time. I don't know. Do you suppose maybe I gave him the idea then?

Anyway, I figured I'd done my duty to my family and the beer was all gone. When he finished his cigarette I got ready to leave. "Eat a couple of these mints for your breath," I ordered and headed for home. I took off the next morning. It was a long drive to Florida, and I wasn't going to spend my whole spring break at home.

Well, then that fall Dad had his stroke and things got bad. Dad didn't die right away. There were all those weeks in intensive care, and then he was home with twenty-four-hour nursing for a long time. Naturally the business went to hell, too, and after the funeral it turned out the money was mostly gone.

Something had to give. We couldn't ask Mom to give up the house; I had to finish medical school, or the whole thing would have been wasted. So Jerry had to leave Buck Prep at the end of the Christmas term anyway, and then there just wasn't enough left over to pay for Harvard and law school, the way Dad had planned it out. The kid was on his own.

Mom was upset when he got himself into that little denominational school in Texas—I don't even remember what they called themselves, but of course our family had always been Episcopalians. By then I was doing my residency. Thirty-six hours on at a stretch, no sleep—there was no way I could get time off to go home and talk to her. I did my best to calm her down on the phone. "At least he's getting a college education," I told her, "and it's free. Don't worry about Jerry. He'll take care of himself."

Well, he did, didn't he? I was right about that.

I admit that I was pretty pissed off when I first heard about the Holy Church of Quantal Redemption. I'd left the HMO by then, and it could have been a real embarrassment for a brand-new proctologist just trying to get established in private practice if it got out that he had a brother running some kind of religious nut cult. Still, I have to say that, in a way, I was almost proud of the little turd.

Transcript of interview with Stacey Krebs.

At the time of my conversion I was a security guard at the Garden. That meant I patrolled the stairways and passages with my two German shepherds; I needed two because Slappy was trained to sniff for firearms and Moe for drugs. Both of the dogs were attack-trained, but I never actually had to send them after anybody. Once they started growling and showing their teeth and tugging at the leash even the drunks calmed down.

We got every kind of performance you can imagine at the Garden. I took them as they came. Of course, some events were worse than others. We never had any problem with the sports crowds, and the only headache with the circus was that the animal smells confused the dogs. Concerts were bad, with all the young girls screaming and trying to throw their panties up on the stage, and I really hated the political conventions because everybody there thought he was a VIP. And you never knew what you were going to get with the religious revival meetings, because when fifteen thousand people got the spirit of God boiling over in them they just weren't going to listen to anybody telling them what to do.

That was what I was afraid of when the Quantals took the place for a five-night stay, but they surprised me. Although the Garden was packed even the first night, it wasn't like that at all. The scalpers were getting as much as a hundred bucks a ticket outside, but the crowd inside was the most orderly I ever saw. One of the preachers would talk for a while, and they'd clap; and then they'd sing a hymn or listen to some organ music or a choir, and then there'd be some more talking. While I was patrolling the passages I couldn't hear what was going on very well, but then I stopped by the main entrance where Annie Esposito was running the checkroom. Everybody who could get in was already inside. Even the teams running the weapons scanners had ducked out for a cup of coffee, so it was quiet there. You could hear the speakers that were rigged up outside for the people who couldn't get in. Annie was listening. "How's it going, hon?" I asked her. She didn't answer, except to say, "Sssshh."

Moe crept under the counter to put his head in her lap and she scratched his ears absently while she listened. That wasn't a good thing to do to an attack dog, who was supposed to stay basically hostile to everybody but his handler, but Annie and I had a thing going. It wasn't perfect. Most of the time she cut me off before we got to bed, and when we did make it, maybe once or twice a month, she was as likely as not to start crying afterward because she'd sinned. What Annie really wanted was for us to get married. I knew that. I would have done it, too, except I still happened to have a wife, somewhere or other, and after she ran off I couldn't find her long enough to get a divorce.

What Annie was listening to didn't sound religious to me. It was more like a lecture. Some man was explaining that God had a whole universe to take care of, and He couldn't bother himself with all the details so He had to use His ministers to keep in touch. That made sense, sort of, but then he got off on a lot of talk about all the other galaxies and how many there were and how far away. I didn't see the point. Then he stopped, the crowd applauded politely, the organ struck up and the choir began to belt out *The Old Rugged Cross.*

"It'll be Reverend Burskin next," Annie said, really looking at me for the first time. "He's pretty inspiring, Stacey. He hears some of the testifying himself, you know."

I thought I knew what she was talking about, because I'd seen the little booths around the sides of the auditorium, all of them always filled, with lines waiting to get into them. I said, "So what about after the show, hon? How would you like us to have something to confess to tomorrow?"

"Don't be such a dope," she said, but it didn't sound like a real No. "Anyway, they don't have confessionals, exactly. Haven't you heard what they're saying?"

I shrugged. There'd been stuff about the Quantals in the papers, but I never get much past the sports pages.

"Well, they're going to keep some of those booths open after the public leaves. For anybody on the staff who wants to testify, I mean. I think I might try it."

"Aw, what do you want to do that for?" I began, trying to talk her out of it. Not that I cared what she might tell some preacher, but if we got out of there too late she'd claim she was too sleepy for a date. But then Slappy began to growl softly; the weapons-check crew were coming back, and that meant that the supervisor was on the prowl. So I blew her a kiss and moved on with the dogs.

But then I did try to listen. Now and then I caught a glimpse of Reverend Burskin through the open doors; he was younger than I'd expected, looking pretty imposing in his white robes. He was telling the crowd how wonderful it was going to be in Heaven, and how none of them needed to worry about Hell; all they had to do was testify for his auditors.

What the hell. When the crowd began filing out they all looked happier than any audience I'd ever seen in the Garden before. So when the cleanup crews were beginning to pick up the litter I got in line for one of the booths that had remained open. I couldn't see the person on the other side of the screen but it was a woman's voice. When I gave my name she stopped me short.

"Don't say anything else just yet, Stacey. Let me explain what's happening here first. You see, I'm an ordained minister in the Holy Church of Quantal Redemption. Think of me as a telephone line to God. He isn't going to pay any attention to what you do most of the time, but when you talk to me you're talking right to Him. So tell me exactly what you want Him to know about you, okay? Start with good deeds. Have you done anything you're proud of lately?"

"You mean—" I hesitated, trying to think of something—"you mean like giving money to the poor, like?"

"That's a good start. Or offering somebody a helping hand. Or just being a friend when somebody needs you. Don't be afraid to brag. God wants to love you, Stacey. Work with Him here, all right? Just give Him the evidence He needs to save you, that's all it takes."

"What about, well, the bad things?"

"Stacey, Stacey," she sighed, "aren't you listening to me? If you *want* God to know bad things about you, that's certainly your privilege. But what goes on God's holy record is only whatever you tell me here, so make up your own mind what you want to say."

So that's how I signed up with the Quantals.

I hadn't been getting along all that well with Father Graziano anyway, and the Quantals just made me a better offer. Annie and I began going to their church on 47th Street, and things really began to pick up between us. Matter of fact, she stopped all that crying, and two weeks later she moved in with me.

Transcript of interview with Arthur John Delaporte, Ph.D.

I want to make it perfectly clear that at no time did I ever hold any grudge against Jeremy Burskin. I had no reason to. He wasn't responsible for getting me fired from my job teaching science at Buck Prep; when the trustees finally got fed up with the Head's innovations and canned him they dumped all his appointees too. As a matter of fact, I owed Jerry a lot, although the first time he tracked me down and made his proposition I turned him down flat. At first. "Shit, Artie," he said, reasoning with me, "what the hell have you got to lose?"

"My job?"

"Right. Your job. Your job as a substitute science teacher in public high schools where half the kids are absent and the other half carry guns."

"I never said it was great, but it pays the rent."

He didn't answer that directly, just rolled his eyes as he looked around at the studio apartment I was living in. Well, the place wasn't much. But Madge was long gone by then and I didn't need much. "What I'm offering you," he said, "is a chance to get in on the ground floor of the biggest growth industry in America. I'm talking about real money. I'm talking about *religion*."

"I haven't been inside a church since they kicked me out of Buck."

He shook his head. "No, no, Artie, you're not hearing me. I'm not talking about you joining my flock, I'm talking about you getting into *management*. I need to have a real scientist in with me. You've got the degree. I'll take care of the rest—ordaining you, for starters. How does Reverend Arthur John Delaporte sound?"

I said, "Crazy."

"Artie," he said, sighing, "if you insist on pissing away the best offer you're ever going to have, I don't want you to think that it's going to blast all my hopes of success. There's thousands of other Ph.D.s around that need a job. I came looking for you because you're the one that got me started—even if you didn't mean to—and I don't forget my friends. Are you afraid you'd be breaking the law? Not a chance. I'm duly ordained myself—"

"From Joe Bob's Quick Service Diploma Factory of Lubbock, Texas."

"From a fully accredited religious university, recognized in every state of the union. So's my church. You call up the Secretary of State and check it out for yourself; we're legit. Tell you what. I've got a tent meeting going in Camden tomorrow night. Come along. See for yourself. You don't have to do a thing, just check it out—though, of course, if you decide you're willing to give a little talk on that wave-particle thing and the observer business I'll pay you for your time. Say a hundred bucks. Cash. Right on the spot."

Well, I couldn't pass up a hundred bucks. I went. And then I stayed.

I made out real well, too. Next to Jeremy Burskin I was just about the second highest-ranking person in the church, and Jerry hadn't lied. The money really rolled in.

The place where we really took off was when we did the Garden in New York City. We signed up twenty-three thousand communicants in five days, and what they paid, admission tickets and love offerings combined, was an average of fifty-four dollars each. If you want to see what a million dollars looks like, multiply that out for yourself.

New York was just the beginning. Within five years we had played just about every big auditorium in the country, Soldier's Field, the Hollywood Bowl—you name it. Every time we played a city we picked up another ten or twenty thousand people, and they stayed with us. We opened branch churches in every city, and we hardly ever lost a convert. Why would anybody leave? We offered the best product of any denomination in the country. When our worshippers died, we explained to them, God, or maybe one of His angels, would look in the great golden book and see what the records said, and on the basis of that they would be saved or damned. Saved was, well, heavenly. Damned was *bad*. But God couldn't be expected to follow every last single soul every minute of every day. God would go by what His ordained ministers passed on to Him. Not just us, either; we never said that. We never claimed that the Holy Church of Quantal Redemption was the only direct-line link to God. We were perfectly up-front in saying that any minister, priest, or rabbi could pass the word along Up There.

But we were the ones who encouraged the testifiers to tell us the *good* stuff. We didn't ask them about their sins. We left that up to their common sense. We never did anything like giving them lie-detector tests, either, and if some of them might have stretched the truth a little about their charitable donations or the number of aged relatives they cared for that was their business.

I have to say that many times I thought I was the luckiest man in the world, and I owed it all to Jeremy Burskin. Maybe the high spot was in the third year, when Madge found out what I was doing and turned up after services, one night in Albany, all sweet and repentant and ready to just try one more time to see if we could get back what we once had, Artie, please? I slipped her a couple of hundred bucks for old times' sake before I sent her away; I didn't believe in carrying a grudge. But I did send her away. Who wanted to be tied down to one recycled lady when there were so many fresh young ones around?

Yes, that was definitely one of the high spots, but there weren't any low ones . . . at least, there weren't until Jerry began drinking.

Transcript of interview with Elizabeth Neisman, a.k.a. Lilibet Van Nuys.

Changing my name had nothing to do with the Church. It was my agent's idea, long before I converted, right after I got the nose job and the silicone and the tooth caps. He looked me over and said I might as well go all the way and get a whole new identity if I really wanted to get into the movies.

Well, I did—invented a new name, got a new wardrobe heavy on thigh boots and sleeveless tops, made up a whole family story for background—but the movies weren't interested anyway. When Reverend Burskin's circus came to town I was working as a dancer in one of the places on Hollywood Boulevard. It didn't pay much. That was all right; I couldn't really dance much, either, and, with a little help from the guy I was seeing at the time, it paid the rent. The guy was Henny Glass. I guess he did me a good turn, because Henny was the one who took me to one of the meetings on my night off because he thought it would be kicky. The rest, like they say, is history.

History is what Henny was after that night, anyway. I went *to* the meeting with him, but the guy I left with was my booth minister, Richy Mannering. And it was Richy who came around to say good-by when the Reverend's group finished their run in L.A., and it was Richy who said I was a good listener, had a nice personality, would do well to join the church and apply for the booth minister's course at the headquarters in Colorado.

It sounded like a good idea—better than anything else I had going for me then, anyway. So I did. They let me in on my first try, and the course was no problem. Richy was right about my being a good listener, and that was half of what the training was about. The other half was learning the patter about Heisenberg and quantum indeterminacy, but I aced that, too—I was always good at pouring a textbook into one part of my brain the night before a test and having it come out right the next day. After all, I'd turned down a scholarship to graduate school at the U of Texas in order to make my run at Hollywood. When we newly accredited booth ministers had our graduation party at the Mansion up on the top of the hill I was Number Two in the class, and would easily have been Number One if I'd wanted to push just a little harder.

So there I was, twenty-three years old and a full-fledged minister of the church, and, believe me, the living was easy. We got paid well, salary plus commissions; that's when I began to be able to put a little money away in the mutual funds. We got to see a lot of the country, too. Once or twice a month we'd all take the campaign to a new city and between times we might be sent to help out a new church somewhere. The rest of the time we spent at the Mansion in Aspen, where we didn't have anything to do but ski or swim or sunbathe or have fun. Every night was party night at the Mansion.

I don't want you to think that there were orgies going on all the time. There wasn't anything like that. People did go to bed with each other sometimes—well, fairly often, really—but what's surprising about that? We were all young and healthy, and we never did it in public and scared the horses. There was plenty to drink for anybody who wanted it, too, and it wasn't hard to find a little recreational dope now and then—well, you could say that about the dorms at the U of T, too. The Mansion was really a lot like those dorms. There were video games and tapes of every movie you ever heard of, and about a million music tapes with really fine systems to play them on; there was a library with eighty thousand books and all the magazines in the world; there was the indoor pool and the outdoor pool and the fitness gym; there were horses for anybody who felt like exploring the trails around the mountain—if money could buy it, the Reverend had bought it for us. And, of course, for himself, because he believed in having a good time, too. And it was all *free*.

I don't mean just free of money. I mean free of guilt, too, because after all that was what the whole thing was all about.

See, what made the job the best I ever could imagine was that we were *helping* people. They'd come into my booth scared and worried, and I'd explain to them that God really wanted them to be saved, and I'd invite them to tell me the things about themselves that they wanted God to know, and they'd leave at the end of twenty minutes or so with their heads in the air, hopeful and happy.

That describes all of us, too. Not just the staff and the booth ministers. I mean everybody, even up to the people at the very top, the lawyers, the accountants, our science guru, Rev. Dr. Arthur John Delaporte, and the Reverend Jeremy himself. They were mostly older than the rest of us, sure, but that was the only difference. I was pretty close to a couple of them, so I know. Even Dr. Artie. He was the oldest of the lot, and sometimes a little more reserved, but that didn't matter. In fact, I thought it was good; I felt I could talk to him about more serious things. Once when we'd been skinny-dipping, late at night, and we were bundled up in towels at the edge of the indoor pool, he said something about his age, and I reassured him right away. I said, "You're young where it counts, hon. Besides, you know so much, and I have to tell you that the thing that really turns me on in a man is intelligence."

I could see that that pleased him. He pushed himself up on an elbow to pour a little more champagne and then lifted his glass to toast me. "So tell me what knowledge you want me to share with you."

"Not a thing right now," I said, yawning.

"There must be something you don't know," he insisted.

"Well—" I thought for a minute. "Well, maybe there is. Like where all the guilt goes."

"The what?"

"The guilt. The bad feelings people come to us with. When they leave the booth it's all gone, usually, but where did it go?"

That made him laugh. "Why does it have to go anywhere?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just thinking there had to be some law of conservation of guilt, you know? Like conservation of energy and all that?"

"Huh," he said. Then he said, "You know what a black hole is? Things just disappear into it, matter and energy, everything. And then they're *gone*. They never show up again."

"Do we have a black hole?"

"If we do," he said, grinning, "it's probably the Reverend Jeremy himself. Are you warm yet? Is it about time we went upstairs?"

Well, it was, and that was that. It was just date talk. It didn't mean anything. Only I'm not sure I didn't make a mistake when, a couple of nights later around the same pool, I happened to mention it to the Reverend Jeremy.

Transcript of interview with Arthur John Delaporte, Ph.D.

The week it began to look like serious trouble we were doing Phoenix, Arizona.

It was really big business there; we always did well with the retirement areas, where the rich old geezers had plenty of time to start worrying about some of the things they'd done to get rich. In spite of all that, Jerry had a lot on his mind. *Newsweek* had come out with that big smart-ass story of theirs, with his picture on the cover and the headline "Prophet of God the Inattentive?" And we'd been talking about getting into the televangelist business, and there were all these TV people trying to do deals with us. The last day we were in Phoenix we had lunch with six of them in Jerry's suite—they had a proposition about setting up a cable channel of our own—and we opened a whole bunch of bottles of wine. When we'd got rid of the television suits and I went off to take a nap before the evening session I guess Jerry just decided to finish off all the bottles that were left over. He threw up when his dresser was getting him into his robes. They had to pull out a spare set, and he stumbled and faltered through his preaching.

Well, that didn't seem to matter. Nobody noticed. Only when I finally got him to bed he looked up at me and said, "Did you ever think maybe we're calling attention to ourselves?"

"That's why we have P.R. people."

"No, I mean God's attention. To me."

Drunks say funny things, of course. I had a pretty good idea that one of the girls had been talking to him, and I was even pretty sure I knew which one—Lili. She was a nice enough kid and pretty smart, too, but smart in a rather dumb way. She was always thinking about things that really didn't have anything to do with the bottom line.

I didn't worry much about it, because the next morning he was fine. We did Oklahoma City later that month, and then Atlanta, and although I knew he was hitting the bottle he mostly saved it until after work. But when we got to New Orleans he was pissed onstage again. That was beginning to look like a trend, so afterward I took him back to the hotel and fed him black coffee until he was coherent enough to tell me what was going on. "I'm scared," he said simply.

"Come on, Jerry. Are you worrying about that Congressional committee? They're never going to touch us."

"Fuck the Congressional committee. I'm scared of God."

That set me back. We never, *ever,* talked about God except in line of duty. He saw the expression on my face and pushed the coffee cup away. "You don't see the problem, do you? What we tell the customers," he said, "is that we're God's TV cameras. He only sees what's going on through our eyes because we're His ordained ministers."

"So?"

"So He sees *us*, Artie. We're flagging His attention. We're the stations He's tuned in on. Don't you worry about what He might be seeing of you and me—especially me? Because I do, Artie. I'm going to die some day. We all are, sooner or later; and I worry a lot about what might be coming next."

And, you know, I couldn't talk him out of it.

I never saw a man go to pieces the way Jeremy Burskin did. We had to cancel Detroit. We spread the word that he was on a retreat—it was the Betty Ford Clinic, actually—but when he came out he wasn't drinking any more, no, but he couldn't make himself get up on that stage again.

Rumors began to spread. Worse than that, our own organization was affected. We had to postpone the rest of the tour. Jerry had become a liability.

I could see only one way of salvaging the operation and I took it.

By then Jerry was holed up in his private place in Aspen, just a couple of miles from the Mansion, with guards around to keep the curious out. I joined him there. In spite of the doctor's orders I brought him a present, a bottle of thirty-year-old Scotch, and while I peeled off the cap I said, "Jerry, I've got an idea. You're frightened of God's punishment after you die, and maybe you're right. There's a way out of it, though. Suppose you never had to die, exactly, at all?"

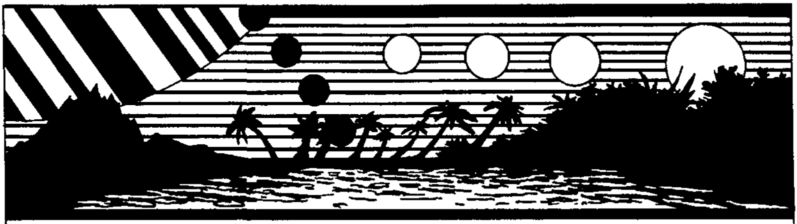
I don't know if he would have agreed to it sober, but I didn't let him get sober again. Not that night, not on our charter flight to Los Angeles, not through all the preparations I'd arranged for him.

So business is pretty good again. Admittedly it's not the same without Jerry. Our grosses are down some, sure, but I've learned how to give the pitch myself, with the help of a couple of drama coaches, and we never fail to invoke the memory of our late leader in every session. There's a big blown-up picture of him in his robes, looking saintly, that I use for a backdrop behind the grand altar, and when I turn to ask his blessing at the end of each performance it usually brings down the house.

I think, in a way, Jerry would be proud of me—if, of course, he was in a position to have an opinion on such matters from his cryonic capsule.

It's a pity that he began to buy into his own pitch. I'm not making the same mistake.

Well, *so* far I'm not, anyway; and if it ever gets to the point where I *do,* well, maybe I'll take a turn in the freezer myself and be not any longer alive, exactly, but maybe also not quite dead enough to have to worry about Final Judgment. ●



Robert Frazier

PILOTING ALONE OUT THERE

is like cave diving in the tropics
while everyone is asleep in stasis
you swim your ship
from the charted star clusters and
their warm bright light
toward the cooler blacker depths
you have only a small node of technology
a mere motherchip like a lamp to guide you

there is a time
when you can't tell where you came from
from where you are going
and you wonder if it is possible
to chart a way back to Earth
by the tiny flashes of physics
that paint these walls about you

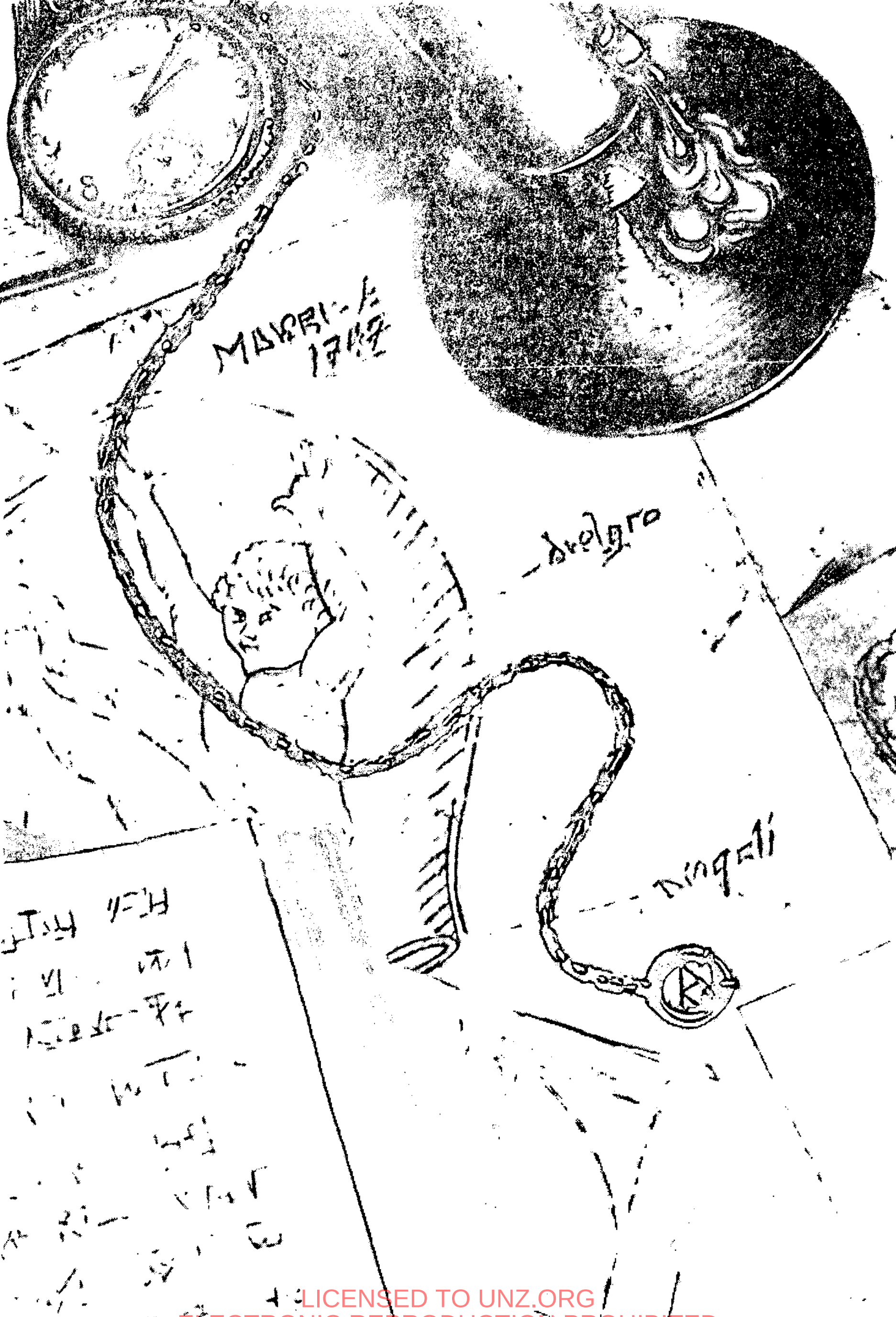
and when you enter an unmapped passage
your own propulsion
the way it stretches time
seems to work against you
kicking up dark stellar matter
that confuses your sensors
you begin to doubt yourself
feeling as truly blind as the white crayfish
that scuttles in the lightless regions
of a deep ocean cave

it is only when familiar stars
begin to show on your screens
that you rise
on a current stirring in your heart
on its bubbles of relief and yearning

at last you breach the solar system
slide into the assigned orbit
and stare down at her
your world
the scarred green-brown barrens
of the Canadian Shield
the soft blue eye of a tropical storm
over the Indian Ocean
the sun glittering across the bay
of Rio de Janeiro
the golden canyons and mountains
your great grandmother called *her* Arizona

a voice hails you on the comm
no one you knew is left alive down there
but it is all familiar
all your family welcoming you
in a single "hello"

you say with an exhale "we made it"
you think
will I ever leave again

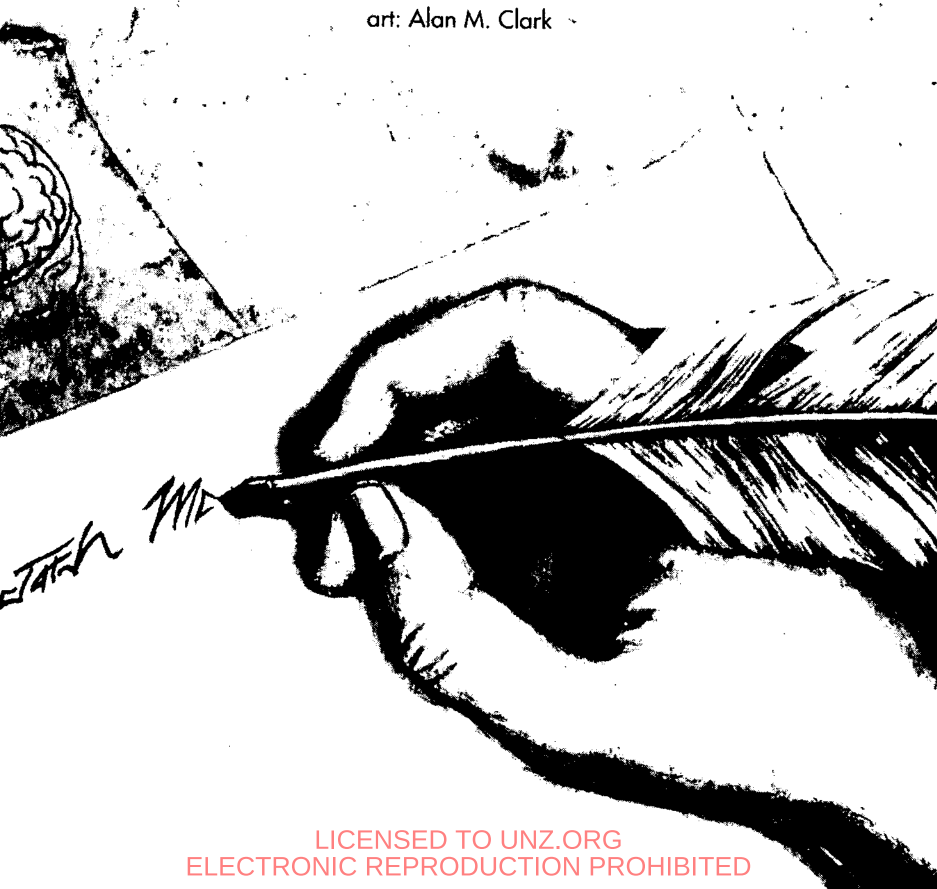


ORIGINAL SIN

Phillip C. Jennings

Recent sales by Phillip C. Jennings include stories to *Universe, Twilight Zone,* and several new sales to *Amazing Stories.* In "Original Sin," he casts a dim new light on Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, and mysterious events that occurred at the turn of the last century.

art: Alan M. Clark



The old abbot entertained his two English visitors while propped up by pillows in his chamber, the only heated room in this war-ruined cloister. The bouquets of spring flowers that flanked his bed did not quite disguise the smell of a diminished invalid. "Please, these letters," he said, patting a packet at his left hand. "It was kind of you to pay your respects. . . "

"You are the vicar of paradise here. At least, of the wreck of paradise, and poets are gluttons for the picturesque," Percy Bysshe Shelley responded, gesturing toward the world outside the window. "I see God's green chaos all about you."

Mary gave him a reproving look. His tone of respect-for-the-dead was obvious to her: it gave a ghoulish flavor to his blithe words. The abbot had enough to remind him of his mortality, and she tried to take a different tack.

Life goes on. "Do you hope to reopen your school? Perhaps with new books?" Percy's teen-aged inamorata asked, sitting small near the foot of the old Franciscan's bed. His mattress was stuffed to hardness, probably with horsehair, and her slight weight failed to make an impression.

The abbot shook his head. "Since General Blücher plundered the country, we count for nothing. We're a forgotten possession of an opium-eating German prince, and I shall not see the day. It's been two years since Napoleon's surrender, and we've made no repairs—we barely survive on the profits of our beehives. But if you are writers, I urge you to forget my regrets. I have a gift beyond my sadness. In the name of hope and progress, read these letters! Tell the world what they say!"

Mary took off her gloves and reached curiously. She undid the ribbon that fastened the worn pages together. "French?"

"The confessions of a poor plain-featured man who may yet change the world from beyond his grave. Read and pass the pages to your good husband. I can wait." The abbot smiled grimly. "What else can I do now but wait for my coming end?"

My Dear Abbé,

I have received no letters from you or Father Rossi these dozen posts, but Versailles is so far from your pleasant Frankenstein as to make accidents almost probable. I always take for granted that you are well in that quiet world, where time does not march as it does here.

Last Sunday I sent you word of my arrival and first awkward interview with my patron. I sought him in a garden where he danced attendance on the royal breakfast, and he chastised me for choosing an ill time to make myself known. But all these past three years were no better, for later I learned that my Baron de Bray was implicated in the business of the queen's diamond necklace, which has eclipsed Marie Antoinette's prestige. My Sunday letter told you the Baron seemed a heated man, but

I did not fully comprehend how I embarrassed him. Only in these last days has it grown clear he cannot fulfill his promises to my mother, and provide me with a clerkship in his ministry. In his disgrace the best he can manage is to write letters of introduction, commending me as a young man more fortunate than himself! Nor did pride prevent me from accepting one hundred livres from his hands, which he may imagine acquits his conscience.

The young bastard Gerard Lambeau now knows his true price. You may suppose that when I left the abbey-school in Frankenstein, I had great hope that the World was ready to lay temptations before me. I am no staunch son of the church, and would have sought solace in the softer bosoms for which Versailles is famous. But the sad truth is that the government of France is bankrupt. The King is obliged to make a desperate promise: to summon the States-General to approve new taxations. Nor will the promise be sufficient—He must actually *do* the thing!

That will take years yet. In consequence, when I deliver my introductions and sit at salons, I am told there are no clerkships anywhere. Poverty shields me from the fair sex, and by this fluke I remain true to all my vows, save obedience alone.

I write in despair, yet I have one prospect. On the strength of my *Treatise on Animal Membranes* I may become a half-creature of the Academy of Sciences—affiliate, associate, or some toe-in-the-door rank. A pension is attached in cases of penury, and if you think I am too young, I can tell you that the great M. Lavoisier won his honors at twenty-five years of age.

I have put myself forward for examination in Languages and Natural Philosophy, and my talents will be equal to any interview. But then—how do I put this? Were the Vatican to ask a service for which I am qualified, the Academy would say: Yes, we have just the fellow. And they would speed me my dignities, knowing my stipend would come from Church coffers, not His Christian Majesty's empty treasury.

All the lords and ladies here are wondrously painted, and the course of events I describe in these sentences is a painted charade, where the roles of supplicant and benefactor are artificially reversed. If I am lent a place in the Papal Service after my importunities, the world must never learn that I begged for it. This too is an instruction from the Academy, ever concerned for its good name.

It shames me to write these things. Even at Versailles, we sense that our age of pretense is over. A cult has formed around Monsieur Ben Franklin from the American States, who wears no wig and dresses simply. You have heard of the marvelous balloon flights? Serfs liberated in Denmark? Feudalism overthrown in Hungary? In time the immunities of the aristocracy in France will be abrogated, and government will function on new principles. But for the present, I cannot bring myself to recount the tricks I play to find food to eat, paper for these letters, and a closet in which to sleep at night.

If you remember me with love, pray write your colleagues in Rome. Do so with speed and persuasion, if you feel the Church must reverse her backward doctrines. The door stands open for philosophical progress, and I would be overjoyed to dedicate myself to this good work. Adieu.

My Dear Lord Abbé,

I received your letter dated August 18th, touching on Lavoisier's chemistries and the latest Turkish war. I am hesitant to repeat my last epistle, in case it has not reached you, for I must calculate the effect of *two* begging letters if it has! What heart must not harden, if pressed too insistently?

I came to Versailles with expectations that have since been disappointed. It grieves me to consider my callow mind, as it was less than a month ago. No matter that you praised my studies at Frankenstein! No matter that I took a keen pleasure in all your library! I had not plighted myself to scholarly ambitions, hardly more than necessary to be a useful clerk, for I placed my hopes in the fickle world. Now, however, misfortune has set me on the path to philosophy. I have been examined by Monsieur Lavoisier and two others, on Italian, chemistry, optics, geometry, Arabic, physics, metaphysics, trigonometry. . . all while my stomach made music from sheer hunger.

The verdict of the Academy was favorable. I shall get recognition "as soon as we find the money." Meanwhile I help Doctor Guettard two days a week in exchange for food and lodging. I enclose my new address, which is the major business of this letter. Unless you tell me otherwise, I continue in my hopes that you have inquired on my behalf among the Colleges of Rome.

Had I fared worse at the Academy's examination, I would not have merited a Vatican post. I must have joined the great crowd of vagabonds whose existence is a sign of these times. France will *use* these people, or they will ruin her. Adieu.

My Dear Lord Abbé,

A virtuous man has died here where I have lodging, and his wife and children are to be put out onto the street. The Duke who orders this eviction is tenderly regarded at Versailles for his charity—I dare not give his name, for sometimes correspondence is not as private as one hopes, and the laws of libel have been severely used in recent years.

For me, Versailles is just a memory. Reality rushes up and down the cobblestones of Paris. I yet hope for Rome. I retain my health, and have added Guettard's taxonomies to my range of knowledge, but Baron de Bray's hundred livres are all spent.

I write letters for the unschooled people on this street, and earn a few centimes while I learn from their rude eloquence. The pages we compose together are sad, angry, imploring, and I am almost a confessor as I take down dictated intimacies. I give these people a voice where they would otherwise be silent, and Louis's government may be ill pleased with me, for I understand His counts and ministers. They are all tender kindly men, and so sensitive that they must not even see the poverty of others, *or hear about it.* Are they not doing enough, they ask, citing numerous preferences, pensions, gifts. . . and with these bad harvests, where should they get the money to do more?

I hear confession in this manner, as a clerk but not a cleric, for I do not wear the robes of a monk. I dare not associate my deeds with the Church, and offend the local priest, for whom Catholicism is a ministry in the royal government. He would write you, saying: Control this upstart. Find him a monastery. His mind is infected with ideas from the rabble.

Yet Father Clugny is as poor as anyone! The irony is that Clugny and I agree so well. I am like the aristocrats, and care to see no more misery. I should be content with books instead. I thank you for your most recent promises, and eagerly wait news from the French University in Rome. Adieu.

Dear Lord Abbé,

I have received joyous news from the Academy. His Holiness has petitioned the King for a scholar versed in the modern sciences, to review Catholic doctrine as it relates to cosmology, beginning in the twelfth century! Perhaps you are composing a letter to tell me this same good news, which guarantees me a stipend—and returns me to the "prison" of my vows, which I escaped less than a year ago.

I write now, before donning my habit and seeking out Father Clugny, who may ascribe a penance that would prevent me from expressing my gratitude very promptly.

And so one era of my life comes to a close. Some men can never be attractive to women. I am one of those ill-favored wretches, or my freedom would have led me elsewhere, never to return. I blame my features, and not my purse, because the fair sex does not always trade love for material security. I have inscribed many letters that speak heart to heart between lovers in poverty. Often they call themselves wicked, because they bring each other nothing but a fraction of transient joy, and against the wishes of both families. Wicked, yes! For many months I hated the maidens I wanted to adore, because they neglected me, and now I must neglect them the rest of my life. But this is one of the harmonies in the music of my life, and here is the main tune: *I would have sacrificed my virtue for worldly things, but the world never noticed.* Where is Satan when you want to sell your soul!

You and Father Rossi were my great teachers. Champions of virtue, you dared ask much from us your students. I am no champion, and I will be well used in a cloistered library. I am still a young man, but if I grow old without being put to the test, you must send back all these letters, so I do not magnify my pride by pretending I fought my devils. By the time I reach my dotage, I will have bored them to death! Adieu. Again, I thank you from my heart.

My Dear Abbé,

I am well horsed, and campaigning south from Orleans in the pious company of elderly Parisian pilgrims, to whom Father Clugny has arranged I should attach myself, guiding them as best I may, especially when we reach the Alps and beyond, where French no longer serves.

This is my penance, and I carry an ancient volume from Clugny's parish library, which has moldered many centuries, and deserves the attention that Vatican librarians may give it. I am using it to teach myself medieval script, and can give you no account of the ideas it expresses, except to say that it *is* a scholarly work of some sort. No, that is not true: Doctor Alguiomer is clearly an Aristotelian, talking about the six categories of *this*, and the four sorts of *that*. But his nomenclature is so different that I might be wise to make a glossary to translate from *his* Latin to *mine*.

Oddly, proud Alguiomer never mentions Aristotle. I may have to retreat from my conclusions. I have no certainty that he is Christian, though he speaks of souls and of Heaven and Earth. Perhaps he was a Moor, or a heretic? Have you heard anything of this man?

We moderns are not so different after all. Doctor Guettard and his boxes and labels! Lavoisier and his new system of chemistry, with its *oxygens* and *hydrogens!* You wondered if Lavoisier deserves his fame, or if he stole from Priestley and Cavendish and Franklin? Yes, *they* did the first experiments, but they never liberated their minds from the old thinking about phlogiston. But there is enough glory in this present age to share with philosophers from every nation. Adieu.

My Dear Abbé,

Forgive me a month of neglect. I need hardly describe Rome to you. Monseigneur Barbiere of the French University says you know the Holy City well. My words only betray hostility. The hills of Rome are surrounded by waste, and the poor contribute their odors to the diseased miasma. Rag-and-bone artisans mold plaster putti to the concupiscent tastes of fat bishops—why does this vex me? I expected broad grandeur, rich decoration and narrow minds, and I am confirmed in all my prejudices.

No, not quite. I did not expect *enemies* among Rome's rococo clergy. "Gerard Lambeau? *Master* Gerard Lambeau? We've had no word of your coming." *The Church is inept,* I thought, delivering my credentials to the college porter, but Barbiere saw me unwelcomed among my bags, and took me aside.

An afternoon of wine and whispered politics explained everything: The Holy Father must have his own Academy of Science, and its advocates regard me as superfluous—worse, as an insult to their own competence. Very well. Institutions collide, and have partisan jealousies, but must they hinder me in every particular? As a man I am undeserving of such wrath. As a scholar, I should ascend to the heights where nothing matters but my work.

I shall not deliver Doctor Alguiomer's book to the Vatican's Secret Library, until they grant me access to the archives, in accord with my charter. I am not petty in withholding Father Clugny's gift, for here is the joke: My foes thought to keep me from a thousand medieval scholars, and Alguiomer is the sum of them all. Monseigneur Barbiere thinks my wise doctor flowered in Palermo one or two decades into the twelfth century, and in the final judgment, his pronouncements were found deficient. In an age when heretics were burned, the Church treated him mildly, commending the man while proscribing his work, because he excited no dangerous rabbles. In any case, Palermo was half Moslem in those days, a haven for Arabs, Lombards, Normans and Byzantines, and beyond Rome's strictures.

Frustrated by Vatican politics, I immerse myself in Alguiomer's lost world, and grow more frustrated as I make progress. Nothing that I do smells of *science.* I am a bastard dog chasing a new scent too far into the woods.

Do you remember that I spoke of writing a glossary in my last letter? A book on Alguiomer's nomenclature? I have made a beginning, and believe I have stumbled on the key to philosophy! I have applied this technique to Plato's *Theaetetus,* first by the counting of words, a tediously analytical exercise. Plato's Greek has two forms of the word "no," and he uses them to set blocks of text apart. Nowadays we use parentheses, and without them Plato has never been correctly translated—the *two* Platos, one inside the other! So by my enumerative approach I hope to understand dead geniuses as they were never understood before.

Alguiomer is worth understanding. Medieval logic is far from our own, but it has charms. For instance, my doctor proved that the Earth moves, and not the Heavens, *four centuries before Copernicus!* How so? Motion is an imperfect state, measured by reference to a container, whereas the static object is satisfied in itself. Heaven is uncontained, far more perfect than sinful Earth, and therefore the *apparent* rotation of the skies is an illusion.

A single paragraph cannot do justice to the beauty of Alguiomer's arguments. They give me dreams at night, but always the dreams turn bad as Rome insinuates herself, and haughty priests chase me from the streets of lost Palermo.

We agree so much with Alguiomer nowadays. For example, that women have souls, for he was a medieval Rousseau who championed benevolent ideas in weighty Latin. He should be rehabilitated as Galileo was, not the man yet, but certainly his theories. If I do this for Alguiomer, perhaps the nightmares will stop. Adieu.

My Dear Abbé,

Never have I endured such a narrow existence, kept from the Vatican libraries by my enemies, and from the life of the streets by my vows. Notwithstanding these complaints I am healthy, and my mind has grown concentrated. I enclose a copy of my first publication as an Academician: my Statistickal Glossary of Plato.

Well, *perhaps* someone may publish it. I am surprised to hear that His Majesty is convening the States-General this coming May, for he had meant to hold off until 1792. The press of events in Paris must be extraordinary, and it may be that Lavoisier's work on gunpowder will be found more relevant than my peculiar efforts.

You may know how arid my life is, when I gossip of French politics and Turkish wars. The Austrians would have His Holiness believe they defeated the Sultan single-handed, while the Russians were off busy somewhere—here the imperial ambassador waves his hand airily. If the Emperor can hold on to the province of Bukovina, the Church will gain the administration of new dioceses, creating Catholics where there were Moslems and Orthodox all these centuries.

Catholics, and *tithes!* Like most of the French here, I keep haughtily to myself among the resultant scrambling for posts, though my cold and concentrated intellect dissipates at night when I escape into sleep. Am I mad? I have been having extraordinary dreams. Plato speaks of a shadow-reality, and Doctor Alguiomer talks of original sin in his disturbing way: We have neglected a part of ourselves since birth, for we are all given a crippled twin soul, which gets lost in the shadows even as we prosper. The dreamer in me confuses my twinship with other divisions: I am an impoverished bastard—No, I am an aristocratic scholar. I live under the moon of old Palermo—No, under the bright sun of modern

Rome. The two of me have never been so distinct, nor so willing to acknowledge each other: But now I tread the borders of lunacy.

How do I convince you of the legitimacy of my dream life, the *only* life in which I have adventures? I will send you my second manuscript as soon as I finish: My treatise on Doctor Alguiomer, whose theories of the mind are as intriguing as his cosmology. But if you think it best to pray for my sanity, I shall not argue. Adieu.

My Dear Lord Abbé,

I trust you are safe in Frankenstein? To think of the things happening in Paris! Let France follow the example of Britain. A monarch who cannot pay His bills is a *limited* monarch, and must behave accordingly.

I thought I had won a victory here in Rome in gaining access to the Vatican's Secret Library, but Monseigneur Barbiere has drunk too much wine for too long—the harsh red wine of Italy, that gives me headaches, and is his major solace in middle age. My foremost advocate never even perceived my doom.

Worse, Barbiere is full of congratulations, for the fatal blow came in the form of an honor: Thanks to my enemies I am His Holiness's envoy to Bukovina. Following a hasty ordination—who am I to remind my superiors of canon law, or of my bastardy?—I go to take possession of however many churches we have there, and to compose a report on the state of society on this forgotten fringe of Christendom.

Clearly the last thing my enemies want is the intellectual restoration of the Church. My role in Rome would have been that of a judge, reviewing ancient trials and holding errors up to ridicule. Papal inquisitors may embarrass posterity by their unscientific prejudices, but not if posterity is kept from learning the truth.

How many masters and doctors have had their scholarship put under interdiction? What wisdom lies moldering behind the Vatican's lock and key? But I shall spare Doctor Alguiomer from this fate. He shall come with me, by carriage to Vienna and then Pest, or however one gets to distant Bukovina, where the language is not very different from the Polish your Father Rossi taught me ten years ago. Adieu.

My Dearest Abbé,

Shall I describe the beauties of the Tyrolean Alps, or rather those of Doctor Alguiomer's psychology? But my carriage jostles too vigorously. Moments of rest are brief, and I cannot make a long letter.

All the Church's missionary orders vie to provide me with guides and interpreters, who will spend half their time pressing me to support their foundations in Bukovina. Will it be the Jesuits? The Benedictines? The

Dominicans? Assuredly it cannot be our Franciscans, for we have not had a voice with the powerful since medieval emperors found us useful.

I shall encounter these seducers within the fortnight in Vienna, and then your worries will be over. You thought I was too isolated in Rome, and hence I took refuge in my inward phantasms.

At this very moment, springtime snow is falling in congealed white flakes, the grass so vividly green that its color glows through the first soft mantle. What purity! You may imagine me staring out my carriage at the hills and the trees, dipping my quill and thinking what to say about my past dreams and madnesses, which I have confessed to you alone. Shall I admit to being transfixed by Doctor Alguiomer? Me, a scientist, converted to his archaic scholasticism?

There are two roads to every valid conclusion; the empirical, and the rationalist. Can Alguiomer's road be wrong, if it takes me where I want to go? But having achieved his heights, I descend the mountain to my own base, and struggle back up the modern way, *for much of what he claims is susceptible to scientific testing!* We can investigate menstrual blood and sperm, of which he speaks in his discussion of original sin. In my mind's eye I see myself installed in some Bukovinan palace, with space and servants, and the power to allocate myself a budget for the necessary equipment, imported from Holland to the befuddlement of Slavic peasants.

I shall call it a hospital, and dedicate a wing to childbirth, as with the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris. Well, we shall see. Adieu.

My Dear Abbé,

What a pleasure to find Father Rossi waiting for me in Vienna, carrying your latest letter! The Church must plan the conquest of Bukovina as if it were a military campaign, with much talk of budgets and supplies. I am tired from today's meetings, but I cannot go to bed without returning you this note of thanks. Rossi will be my interlocutor on the trip east, much more than these black-clad Benedictines and Dominicans, who try diligently to keep me organized. The German of Frankenstein is different from that spoken here, but I understand the local dialect—my game, however, is to confine myself to French. Already my supposedly ignorant ears have heard things said about "this Parisian puppy" that make me glad of my true friends.

These Austrian clergy have surrendered the Church to their Emperor. Joseph has the right of *placet regium* over all papal edicts, and pays their livings out of the tithes He collects for them. He has dissolved a thousand inactive monasteries, but this makes Him my friend, for we can be more energetic without that dead weight. I do not trust this friend, however. He is beginning to repent of His past reforms.

You will likely get my Tyrolean message much the same time as this one, and think I am hard-hearted to want a hospital in Czernowitz, not so much for the sick Christians of Bukovina as for my own researches. Yes, I am hard, but I am driven by intellectual zeal. I hope to investigate Doctor Alguiomer's theories of original sin, which have to do with male and female "effusions."

We humans are generous, Alguiomer says. The female element of blood supplies the newborn child with its vital and fleshly part, as opposed to the rational and imaginative part, which comes from the male. In a better world, all blood would conjoin with all sperm, and there would be no waste of issue.

God supplies the third part of ourselves; the self-aware soul. If humankind is generous, can He be less so? The "sins" of menstruation and onanism come about because the soulful element *already inheres* in the blood and sperm, and dies when they fail to combine to produce a child.

Alguiomer acknowledges that we are physically unable to prevent this murder, which is original sin, and not a sin of the will, but God has given us a chance to signify our good intentions, for in every birth there is a twin who might be viable if we were not quick to neglect it. According to Doctor Alguiomer, the *placenta* is a combination of two gifts—God's and the mother's—and the male contribution is not altogether lacking, so that in some cases this second child is so much shapeless meat, but in others it approaches the human condition.

Here is our guilt. Have any of us made provisions for our brothers and sisters of the womb? Do we ask in childhood what might have happened to them? Alguiomer suggests that a limbo exists, half-connected to Earth, where our dead placental twins wait to be reconciled to us—but we must take the initiative, not just at night when we commune with this world in our dreams, but in the strong light of wakeful daytime.

It was sufficient for Saint Anne to make her best efforts to keep her daughter's shadow-twin alive. Thus Mary was born without original sin, and she in turn. . . but I imagine you shaking your head at my enthusiasm.

I shall do what I can to nurture the afterbirths of the women who deliver in my future hospital. I believe my efforts have scientific value, for some techniques work better than others at staving off corruption, and enhancing healthy growth *outside the womb*. I shall apply everything I know about respirable gasses and porous membranes and electricity to the problem. If, as an *accidental* by-blow of these efforts, some young Slavs and Germans grow up holy and without sin, I shall be astonished—but I plan to investigate the possibility.

Here I stand, half-skeptical and half-credulous. It will do my reputation no good if the world learns that Doctor Alguiomer has inspired my work. I am not so far gone that I fail to realize my danger. When I finish it, I must publish my treatise under a nom de plume, I hope through your good offices. Let the world look to Frankenstein and not this other city with the unpronounceable name.

I have not mentioned politics in this letter, for obviously the view from Vienna is that of Marie Antoinette and her party, and no one here can believe that she has lost her significance in French affairs. I am glad to have Rossi to talk to. Again I thank you for sending him to me, no matter what he secretly reports to you about my sanity. Adieu.

My Dear Abbé,

I have held off writing until I could fix an address for you to send to, hoping that Father Rossi was keeping you abreast of our travels down the Danube to Pest, thence eastward toward Debrecen. Europe lies under siege here, surrounded by mountains and forests, Gypsies and bears, Wallachians, Jews, and a thousand monsters of Slavonic superstition. By "Europe" I mean a German middle class inside the city walls, and Hungarians lording on top. The tides of history have isolated them in their castles, and made this eastward fraction into Protestants, a prideful aristocracy with their own language, religion and blood. But these haughty warriors gather to play Mozart, and one of them told me of the storming of the Bastille in Paris.

They are too few to rebel against their Catholic Emperor, but they do not love him. I think they are *real* aristocrats, a superior race, such as the counts of France may have been five centuries ago, and I think they are doomed, for they have no friends in this world except each other. But when they go, all the culture and learning in this province will perish with them.

I must go from this place to the next country east, yet further from events in France. Rossi says the abbey has given shelter to emigrés of the aristocratic party—I imagine them bending your ear to their troubles. Remember there is another side to every story! But you will accuse me of hypocrisy, for I have spoken well of my Hungarians. Do not think that if I were made to decide, I would favor them against the peasants, whose grandchildren may someday learn to read, and study, and play Mozart, unlikely as that seems. God grant that I might found a school in Czernowitz, as well as a hospital, and you can send monks to help me.

What did my pen just do? Make a resolution? I surprise myself, expressing a depth of feeling I did not know I had. Very well. Send me a crop of scholars. When your aristocrats grow hungry enough to consider teaching for my sort of wages, send them too. I long to hear French spoken as in Versailles, which they say is shut up and abandoned. Adieu.

* * *

My Dear Abbé,

Zsigo Pass! The gate to nowhere! The Emperor's classicists named Galicia and Transylvania, but Caesar's legions never reached this far.

Yet half of these people are Roumanians, whose language derives from Latin. The Romans settled Illyria and Pannonia with a race so obedient to tyranny that they endured Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Gepids, Herulians, Lombards, Huns, Avars, Slavs, Bulgars, Magyars, Serbs, Turks—endured and *prospered*, for they have spread from Thessaly to the Dneiper. Blessed are the humble! I should be able to understand them if travelers' stories are true, but I have failed. *They* are sometimes able to understand *me*, and it is also true of my Ukrainians—they get the gist of my Polish, but I cannot quite make out their answers.

(It is always of vital importance that peasants understand such exalted personages as myself!)

Bukovina is not to be part of Austria's military frontier. Too many soldiers may frighten the Germans who are migrating from Swabia. I am grateful. Edifices might have been taken for barracks, which I can now distribute for better purposes. I would have preferred my hospital in a flat place near the center of Czernowitz, but Castle Wergau is built on a crag. Pregnant mothers must someday puff up a winding road, two miles from the central market.

I am rich in buildings, and in plans. I issue charters left and right, and coax bishops who find me unworldly to the point of madness, for what can be done without money? Here is the problem, for every coin that leaves a peasant's hands travels a circuitous route to Vienna and thence to bankers who—if past debts are satisfied—may lend new money on bond. Or maybe not. France is near defaulting, and that makes them nervous. They must be appeased with higher interest rates. While these are negotiated, the Church founders on. I would furnish my vast rooms, and put benches on that two mile road for the sake of my peasants, and so Father Rossi goes out at nights to bless houses and exorcise evil spirits, all by the way of barter.

How remote is the likelihood that I will ever afford the tools I need for scientific work! I think of the thousand inactive monasteries Emperor Joseph shut down, and all the benefices they offered—such a flow of money! Such a flow in France, to keep Versailles going all these years! Great wastes of wealth! Now all that is stopped as if by dams thrown across a river, but the river is not diverted to irrigate my worthy causes. It has gone dry, and I cannot hire enough servants to keep my castle dusted and free of cobwebs.

I have a chapel on the first floor, for Wergau has been home to Polish lords as well as Turkish beys. I keep my Alguiomer on the lectern there. When I consult it, you may imagine a scene so medieval it would make you smile. Darkness and cold fog outside, a few wax candles within—for a papal envoy must never burn mere tallow against the gloom.

Ah, Abbé! Send me a babbling aristo! Send me a littérateur to write the plays I could stage here: *Hamlets* and *Orlandos* ranting in my huge foyer. But I have asked enough of you already. If I complain and beg, you must take it that I am that sort of sinner. I have a roof over my head, the respect of the local population, and a goal in life which I may yet achieve, and in these times that makes me fortunate indeed.

I thank you again for Father Rossi, who reads the proceedings of many scientific societies, and has contributed several ideas to my thinking. I shall make him headmaster of our first school here, in an old customshouse-barracks on the lower side of the city. We may set up a semaphore for messages, for all Czernowitz lies in view from my upper walls and windows, a town hardly bigger than Frankenstein, though compacted like the bound foot of a Chinese lady, and fortified from every angle, as if that foot had corns and callouses. Within two days of our arrival, your champion priest went out to make sure of the safety of our Jews and Moslems, who might have suffered during the transition from one rule to the other. This is the kind of man he is, though we were too late to befriend any Turks, who are gone "with all their plunder." Let us hope their departure marks the advent of a new age of enlightenment here. Adieu.

Dear Abbé,

I am using this new method to send you my letters, from the conviction that my last two messages were intercepted by an Austrian spy, and sent to the local governor. Why did he not just copy them, and post them forward? Couldn't he imagine you would chide me for my "thoughtlessness"? Had he been wise I would have bared my soul time after time, perhaps about greater things than lagging finances.

Thank you for the copy of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man.* Will the light from Paris ever shine here?

If I am correct, your last word of me was when I was barely ten days into my duties. I had no furniture, and I ate whatever pious Christians left in baskets at my hospital's door.

They still bring food, but thank God it is for the succor of some poor patients, who now share the ground floor with me. My lodgings shall retreat by stages up into the *donjon* tower as we get more cases and I fill freshly made cabinets with records of treatment. I hope to emulate Monsieur Franklin's Philadelphia Hospital in its standards of order, privacy and hygiene, and consequently my more delirious wretches ask if they have died and gone to Heaven.

We have a Jewish fiddler in Czernowitz who can read musical notation.

I pay him to play for hours on end, sacred works and secular, and folk tunes too, whatever has been published and I can borrow. He does this to cheer my patients, and shares his Handel and Haydn with a blind Gypsy boy who has a genius for imitation—thanks to the despised Jew, the despised Gypsy now has a fine new fiddle of his own, and we are treated to glorious duets. I believe I am a scandal to the better families here, but I silence them by asking for the donation of a pianoforte, preferably to be played before my bedlamites and lepers by their educated sons or daughters. It is at this point, when the silence has grown just long enough, that I modify my tactics, and suggest they give me a few gröschen for new sheet music, and they are always generous.

So much has happened these seven months! Louis is King in name only, and the enemies of France muster to attack her. My French father is sufficient cause for the local governor to spy against me, though Baron de Bray is certainly *not* a friend of the National Assembly. I have had repeated reason to circulate the fact that my mother is German, and that I was educated in the Palatinate. I have spent more of my life in Austria than in France!

Defending myself, I have won friends. They are the sort I deserve for lacking the courage to champion the rabble of Paris, because these "friends" speak against all things foreign, and all things enlightened.

I dare not answer for myself, but Jesus Christ has given me the words when I simply must calm their storms of hate, and so this year has seen me become a pilgrim earnest for God as for Science. I am as uncomfortable in this role as if you gave me silk stockings and a periwig, and told me to dance at a royal ball. Are you not staring at this page and thinking: Preposterous!

If you get this letter, I shall know that I can trust to send you money, which I am beginning to collect for the business of the Church, more easily than some months ago. I shall send a list of the equipment I need. Much can be gotten in Amsterdam by your friends there.

The large things, kilns and cauldrons, I can get here, and so I have omitted them. And now, if our rupture in correspondence has prevented you from sending a dozen scholars I can employ—and I know in the old days you strove to find livings for your less fortunate graduates—please send them while I still have places to give away. Father Rossi can go to Vienna to meet them halfway. Adieu.

My Dear Abbé,

Rossi will hand you this letter in Vienna, together with the money I promised, and perhaps you will read this standing in the same room with your best gift to the people of Bukovina, whom I so trust and treasure. The air will glow with smiles, and I shall not dispel that glow with talk of politics, even Austrian politics, which can be of only slight importance to you Frankensteiners west of the Rhine.

Rossi also carries as much as I have done of my treatise on Alguiomer, which is a child of my intellect. I love it dearly, but this poor creature cannot walk on its own. Alguiomer could not have anticipated the developments of modern philosophy, and has no answer to give Berkeley, Descartes, or Leibnitz. Accordingly our medieval doctor must prosper in a metaphysical baby-carriage of my own provision, and this foreword has long gone neglected.

When you send my scientific equipment, ask that it take a northerly route via Galicia. I enclose my own watercolor sketches of our castle-hospital, and of Czernowitz seen from my tower window. The building under the rooftop clothesline is Father Rossi's school. No one in town knows that by arranging our linen one way or the other, we send messages to each other. Adieu.

My Dear Abbé,

With so many young men writing you from Czernowitz and the countryside around, we strain the Imperial post, and perhaps the governor's spies have given up trying to divert all our letters. I understand that Brother O'Brien uses English, and Moroni, Italian, which might as well be Iroquois and Hottentot among these narrowly schooled Germans. I shall not provoke you with Roumanian. I speak it after a fashion, but if there is a Roumanian orthography, I have not learned it.

You ask if I plan to linger in Bukovina the rest of my life. It is my privilege to appoint myself to positions and be confirmed by the local bishop, and perhaps I should do so on more than an interim basis. If I returned to Rome I should don once more the mantle of the French Academy of Sciences, which is no protection in these present times.

The Church has found bad friends in France, and I want no part of the consequences. In any event, I now have the space and the servants I spoke of in an earlier letter, and some equipment, and my experimental skills are not entirely calcified, for I am able to brew up three different gasses.

We have delivered dozens of babies in my hospital, and in every case we have timed the decay of the afterbirth, as it varies according to temperature and other conditions. It is my first conclusion, that laudable life and growth and healing are fostered by the *same* conditions that speed corruption, which I suspect is due to some element like a gas, for it is omnipresent, but filtered out of our healthy bodies by membranous defenses.

Our blood carries oxygen, the respirable gas, to the cells of our body, but I must contrive another mechanism than a pumping heart to provide oxygen to the cells buried inside my placentae, and this problem confounds me utterly. I do not think Doctor Alguiomer would prevent me from grinding up these organs for the purpose, since they lack the capacity to feel pain—according to his doctrines, this comes from the male parent, who contributes *reason* and *form*, while my afterbirths are unintelligent and shapeless.

But then I must float the resulting free cellulae in a broth of living blood—and blood coagulates. In the case of some poor wretches it does not, and they are always in danger of bleeding to death, and I can provide free living in my hospital for any Christian who has this unfortunate condition, but I should seem like what people here call a *vampir*, waiting eagerly to profit from their mischances.

Suppose any one of my servants decided to win my gratitude by contriving an "accident"! Ah, this is very tricky, and I pray that Satan has not found His way to tempt me to evil. But I have taken that first step, for which you cannot damn me, of proclaiming free refuge for destitute haemophiliacs.

By my reckoning, some of your equipment may arrive this autumn, and I wonder if you have heard of a kind of dog-whistle, that emits a note humans cannot hear. Father Rossi thinks that as these notes give pain to animals, others might kill the tiny animalcules, which he thinks grow on meat and contribute to rot. As you see, there is no limit to the scope of our researches! You may imagine a roomful of Roumanian urchins, blowing inaudible whistles at a vat of ground flesh, while animals howl in protest outside the castle yard! Follow them home to describe their work to Mama and Papa at the end of the day! I must be careful, for you need not be old in this part of the world to remember when people were burned for witchcraft.

Ah well. I hope I have entertained you with my follies. Adieu.

My Dear Lord Abbé,

I am pleased with your purchases, as with your former gifts of Father Rossi and the other teachers. Thanks to you I can add electricity to my repertoire; shocks and sparks and twitchings such as these walls have never seen. I have scheduled an entertainment for the better families of this province, for the only way to avert suspicion is by being open—but not to the extent of discussing Doctor Alguiomer, who would put them to sleep.

My laboratory is on the third floor of this hospital. The turret-cubbies where archers once shot at their enemies are lodgings for my lesser staff, or annexes to my library.

There is much upset in the world, about which it is best to keep close counsel. Our Emperor is dead, and France has gone apostate—I no longer have the heart to prophesy progress or doom, since both come in forms I no longer recognize, even if I were close to events. I wonder if I seemed strident in my earlier letters, more than now? It is one thing to fear the consequences when the Church leagues with the wrong side, but our harvest of hate is so great I am sent reeling. Priests *elected* by their congregations? A Church of France, as independent as the Church of England? Those who dictate these things have little love for Christ, or for history.

If I keep silent about my placental experiments, you will conclude that I have gotten nowhere, or that success has turned me into a monster greedy for fame, who would post my findings in a dated envelope to the Academy to document my priority. The truth is I have made many little progresses in retarding the spoilage of animal tissue. Now I face the task of combining them in the best sequence, as a cook combines the ingredients of a feast.

To this I may add the ingredient of electricity, when I learn what it contributes. Lastly, I must consider *why* all these activities have beneficial effect, and most especially why the unheard sounds of my Gypsy boy's "dog-violin" kill animalcules without rupturing the cellulae in my placental soup. I fear that different inaudible tones have specific and dangerous effects, and perhaps I should publish nothing about this aspect of my work, for fear of handing the nations a new weapon, like that German monk in the thirteenth century, who gave them gunpowder.

Are you curious whether I have any sinless babies as a result of these activities? According to their parents, yes in some cases, but yes also in cases where the mother delivered out in the barn, so in the wide view my answers mean nothing. Doctor Alguiomer might answer that I am only just now able to do *all that is presently possible* to keep shadow-souls alive, and I will grant him that, but my motives are more than pious: I am doing something that was never done before, and extending the bounds of human knowledge. Adieu.

My Dear Abbé,

You must not blame me for your last missed letter, for we are finally at peace at this end of the world. In any case one of your messages has gone astray as well, for you said something to Brother O'Brien and Father Rossi about scolding me, but I remain unscolded. Now I must consider which of my sins has offended you, the kindest and most liberal of our brothers in gray. Could you *favor* this "Church of France"? I hardly think so.

I swear I have not bled any haemophiliacs except adventitiously, always with my first eye to their recovery, no matter how this delayed my experiments. I beg you also to consider how fruitful my work could be, if it becomes possible to grow meat in vats outside the bodies of living animals, which then need not be slaughtered.

Techniques which retard the corruption of my placentae, may help heal limbs injured in battle, which now grow gangrenous much of the time. We are keeping our Gypsy boy busy in the surgical ward, and hope soon to make a mathematical case for "sonic healing."

Then again, these methods may preserve food far into the winter, so that we do not have one season of waste, and another of famine.

But perhaps you feel I should publish my findings with utmost dispatch. There is profit in them, for I now have a hundred ninety pounds from a single placenta prospering in my laboratory, albeit in the form of a bloody soup, and I believe my processes will work with any sort of ground muscle tissue, from any higher mammal.

I could publish, as Cavendish or Priestley published, explicit as to the facts, but without a theory to *explain* those facts. Who do they say discovered oxygen nowadays? Priestley? Or Lavoisier, who came up with the nomenclature? Before I hand him another triumph, I should like to tilt at this challenge myself. Then if I fail and someone else succeeds, I will be the more prompt to acknowledge his genius.

I am disappointed to leave Doctor Alguiomer behind me, for nothing in all this proves anything regarding his claims. We have parted company irrevocably now, no matter that he almost stole my soul in Rome.

Having written the above, it came to me that what I said was far from true. Can you guess what I must have done, suddenly realizing that I had not followed Alguiomer *in the least*? Inasmuch as the ultimate object could only be, to provide the placental soul with a true human body!

I have just flooded my second vat with half the mass of this prosperous afterbirth I spoke of. I then faced a quandary: Whom could I decently go to, for the necessary male ejaculate? What would you have done? Modesty enjoined me to one solution, and Alguiomer counts it a sin only if my efforts fail to produce a child.

Scandal and foolishness! I shall keep this experiment quiet, and I pray it *is* foolishness, for how could any fetus be nurtured in that vat? Does even the English syringe you sent me have a fine enough tube? Perhaps this is it: the step too far. This is the thing I ought not to have done. If you had scolded me before, I deserve it now, for excitement has led me beyond prudence.

Brother O'Brien has just come to my rooms with the warning that Austria and France are marshalling for war, belying the hopes at the beginning of this letter. I shall post this off without exercising my ingenuity on excuses and apologies, for fear that if I delay even a day, they may close the borders and this letter will be lost as many others have been. In any case, let me explore my contrition, and tend to the duties sin has lain upon my shoulders, and hope for your forgiveness. Adieu.

The abbot of Frankenstein spoke to his two English visitors after they returned the final page. "I beg you not to remember my friend for his earnest defense of onanism. Pray with me that he finally perfected his contrition, though only after repeating his sin, and elaborating his experiment by the addition of menstrual blood when it seemed doomed to fail. I do not say that he meant to keep these subsequent iniquities from my ears. He would have told me. But allow me to ask—when were you born? In what year?"

He turned to the young woman. "1797," Mary Shelley answered huskily.

"The child is six years older than you. A young man of twenty-five, much the age of his father when last I saw him. I leave you to consider what Gerard Lambeau's servants thought when they saw a fetus growing in that second vat."

The abbot paused for strength, and spoke again. "My young friend took risks. Among the townspeople of Czernowitz, respect gave way to outrage. That was after France and Austria went to war and my correspondence was interrupted. None of my letters since 1791 have ever been answered."

The abbot paused again. "I believe Bukovina is Russian now."

"What about O'Brien, and Father Rossi, and the other monks you sent there?" Percy asked.

The abbot shook his head. "Gerard brought them down. They were foreigners, and the times were bad." He sighed. "There has been so much death. Between then and now we have endured nothing but war. They loved science as I do, and tried to save his work. When the castle-hospital was invaded and set afire many of them paid an immediate price for the risks they took."

Mary smiled. "What about the baby's umbilicus? On your dear sacred head, how could any of this be true? It makes a good tale, but how could this fetus ever be fed?"

The abbot raised his hands helplessly. "Tubes. Syringes. Desperate stratagems. Not far from here lives an ugly young man much like his father, but without a navel. . . At least the Jew escaped. Castles always have one secret tunnel. Don't ask why Isaac cared to write me, but he assured me that Gerard took every measure to keep his son alive, once he saw that first little bean of flesh. I can't guess how he managed." The abbot fumbled for another letter, not part of the packet. "Can you read German?"

Mary shook her head. "What would you have us do? We've spent twelve pounds on what's left of your library. We really can't afford to buy your correspondence."

"Nor would I sell it. The light—Gerard called it the light of Paris—is in your hands now. Tell the world. My protégé's researches must be revived. That sonic treatment means life to millions! You must inspire the reading population of England and Europe. Tell them! Wait, listen and tell them all the good things, not the bad!"

The abbot began to translate, his voice thin and taxed by language too heavy for his condition.

Lord Abbot of Frankenstein,

I wish that I could make them not so, these bad words I write you, sharing the darkness of my own soul. Doctor Lambeau was your son, for "abbot" means father. He told me that and from my own studies I know it is true. He was a man of hopes that you taught him and he taught me, and a man of doubts that he confessed to you alone. He is dead now. God's light shine upon you, and give you a good heart. Toward the end he spoke to God often, praying over the child.

We Jews have a story of a man made by men, a monster of clay, and the story-tellers make him out to be fearsome. There are so many stories. There will be new stories now, of blood-drinkers and electrical lightnings and howling dogs and mad French radicals, all mixed together.

Beware this race! It was the story-tellers who created the true monster, and it wound like a snake up to the doors of Castle Wergau, carrying torches and crying for death. It howled: Make nothing new, nothing better, nothing different than before. We gave them back their sick, because they had the right, but when we opened the doors they pushed in and set fires. Among you Christians there are priests of different schools, and theirs wore a black headpiece as the priests in Russia do. Your son stepped out to challenge him, heresy against heresy and words against words, but the other one called him Satan, and turned his back to his death.

I did not see it. I was up the stairs with a bucket for the child, and when the people set to plundering, we who tried to save things looked not very different—everyone was laden, and the air was dim and smokey. I made it to the cellars, the baby quiet in his sodden blanket as if he knew my fear, and we escaped through a passage crusted with white like snow, and air so dead I feared we would suffocate.

I left the bucket in a hedge to lead my blind friend Zerko out to freedom, and came back—Praise the Holy Name, at least this much went right. Three of us alive we left that place, but we took despair with us, two fiddlers so heavy in our minds we cannot play music, except to soothe the baby when he cries.

Why did the story-tellers war against our healing notes? There is a sickness in me yet, the sickness of not understanding, and not wanting to understand such evil, but the child saves me. I write for his sake. You are his grandfather in the spirit, and may wish to make some provision for him, if a wandering Jew and a blind Gypsy fall short of friends in the years to come. We are cursed for our lineage. Many borders are closed to us, but we will seek some way westward to your country.

I think the darkness will not last forever. I can write now, as I could not a week ago. I fight to smile, so that little Gerard has the gift back from me that he gives so freely. God grant you someday to see his face capable of joy. Amen.

Percy patted the apostolic hand. "On our journey to Switzerland, we'll train our eyes sharply for blind Gypsy fiddlers." He smiled. "Perhaps we should look to a new messiah out of—I wish my memory commanded the name of that morbid Austrian town."

"The sinless twin!" Mary colored and rose to her feet. "Forgive our blasphemies."

"You will do what I ask? You will tell the world?"

Mary bent and gave the old man an encouraging kiss, but no answer. On the twenty mile drive through war-ruined countryside to Speyer on the Rhine, she and Percy discussed Gerard Lambeau as they looked through the books they'd bought at the abbey. " 'The light of Paris.' We English have been fighting the lucifers of Paris these twenty years," her companion said.

"In any case, Academician Lambeau was none too sure his science would serve mankind any better than gunpowder," Mary agreed. She blushed. "We were not avid to hear the Jew's letter. It showed on our faces. All we wanted was for the abbot not to strain himself to death in front of us. The old man knows we're not the ones to tell this story to the world. Not the way he'd have it done. How sad for him."

"We are as we are, not sworn to bear others' burdens, but to cast them off and leap free," Percy answered.

They reached their destination, the courtyard of a riverfront inn. An ugly giant came to lead the carriage horses away. The stablehand gave the Shelleys a sharp look as they stepped down, spinning theories about Isaac the Jew and that handicapped Gypsy: "Who would pay the price of a cure to men whose music you can't even hear!"

Blind Zerko's young foster brother understood the travelers' English. He had his father's legendary aptitude for languages, and he would need it if fortune smiled on his hopes to emigrate to the American States. "Yet I have seen miracles," he called back, speaking out of place, a member of his *class commanding the attention of* theirs.

Mindful of his impropriety, young Gerard turned away before he had a chance to catch Mary's reaction. It astounded her: an unreasoning terror *she would remember the rest of her life, a terror that made her blush with guilt.*

"I shall have him spoken to," said the innkeeper. "Laborers nowadays!" Their host bent his shoulders to Mary's smallest portmanteau. "It's books that does it. Too much education sets them dreaming. It will come to no good in the long run, no good at all." ●

—for Eleanor Arnason

Not a Dick Novel

Dwight and I had just finished eating
When we walked out after the storm.
The sky looked like a painting.
Clouds formed into perfect spheres
Clustered across the sky like cotton balls.
"If this were a Philip K. Dick novel," I said.
"This would be our first sign
That something was terribly wrong."
Dwight agreed, but
The sky didn't split open,
We didn't wake up,
And Palmer Eldrich never spoke at all.
Instead, we got in the car,
And drove away,
Back to our lives of impossible solidity.

—Lawrence Person

Tor Books recently reprinted Pat Murphy's Nebula-award-winning novel, *The Falling Woman,* in trade paperback. Ms. Murphy is currently finishing up a new novel based on her earlier Asimov's stories, "Traveling West" (February 1991) and "An American Childhood" (April 1993). In her tale for this magazine, she explores the intricate and dangerous moves that must be mastered when one practices the ...

GAMES OF DECEPTION

Pat Murphy

art: Steve Cavallo

The word gwai-gai means "trick" or "deception" in Cantonese. I learned the game of the same name many years ago, when I was apprenticed to a tiny wise man who was court jester and advisor to the Emperor of China.

The game is similar to chess, which I understand originated among sages in the distant land of Hindustan. Like chess, gwai-gai is played on a checkered board with thirty-two pieces—sixteen black and sixteen white. As in chess, there are two towers, two horses, two elephants (or bishops, as the game is played in this country), a king, a queen, and eight foot soldiers or pawns. The goal of gwai-gai is the same as that of chess: to capture your opponent's king.

But here's where the difference comes in. In gwai-gai, a player's pieces appear identical while in play. You have sixteen playing pieces, one exactly like the other. You can identify a piece only by picking it up and looking at the mark on its underside. While in play, a pawn looks like a horse; a queen looks like a king. At the start of the game, each player arranges the pieces in the two rows of squares at one side of the board. The front row may be all pawns, as it would be in chess. Or the row could be an assortment of pieces: a queen, a tower, a horse. Your opponent does not know what arrangement you have chosen.

Each piece moves according to its identity: A bishop moves on the diagonal; a pawn advances one square at a time, moving on the diagonal only to capture an opposing piece, and so on. But all that your opponent knows of your pieces is deduced from their movement on the board. A queen can masquerade as a pawn, moving slowly across the board, square by square; she can pretend to be a bishop, moving only along the diagonals. You can conceal her identity until the moment that you elect to reveal her true nature and she sweeps in to conquer.

Of course, once you have revealed a piece's identity, there's no going back. Once you have revealed your power, your opponent—if he has any brains at all—will remember that piece.

You never know exactly what's going on until the game is over. You can guess, but you don't know for sure.

Gwai-gai is a complex game of strategy and intrigue, memory and duplicity. It is very much like life at court. I enjoy it immensely.

I was playing gwai-gai with Princess Janeka when I told her that her father had betrothed her to King Alarack, the ruler of the adjoining kingdom. She would marry in a month's time. She looked up from the game board, her face suddenly pale. I had taken her by surprise.

At age seventeen, she was a beautiful young woman. Her long hair, braided and pinned up by her chambermaid, caught the sunlight that shone through the open window of my tower room. "Marry King Alarack?" She shook her head, genuinely upset. "I thought . . ." She stopped in mid-sentence, but I knew what she meant to say. She thought we were friends. We had been playing gwai-gai together since she was a child of ten. True, I was fond of her. She was a clever girl, a lovely girl. But feelings must be put aside in the interests of peace.

"The King, in his wisdom, feels the alliance with Alarack is uncertain," I told her. "Your marriage will make it strong."

She shook her head again, her eyes wide. "The King feels nothing but what you tell him to feel. Why have you done this to me?"

I stood, gathering my robes about me. "Princess Janeka, you are upset, or you wouldn't say such things." She knew better than to speak so plainly. I am the court wizard and the King's advisor. Officially, I have no power.

"You want to keep the peace," she said, studying my face. "And you are willing to sacrifice me to do it. But there's one problem. I won't marry him. He's an old man and he'll shut me up in his castle and show me off like a precious gem. He has a bad attitude and bad breath." She shuddered.

"Princess, I have told you many times that the needs of the kingdom come before any of our personal desires." I reached across the board to touch her hand, but she drew it away before I could. "You have no choice in the matter."

She continued studying my face. "I have more choices than you realize, Wizard."

I looked down at the game board, ignoring her bravado. She is a sweet child, but headstrong. "It is your move, Princess."

"I understand that," she said quietly. "But I think we are playing another game now."

She stood gracefully, her full gown rustling with the movement.

"Now, now," I said soothingly. "Stay and have a cup of tea. I have a new blend from the East. Abdel will make it as you like it." I glanced at my servant, Abdel, who inclined his head in a bow.

"No. I must be going." She turned and hurried out the door and down the stone stairs that led to her chambers.

"She is angrier than I thought she would be," I said to Abdel. "We'll have to keep an eye on her."

"I told you she would have none of it," he said, still looking after the retreating princess.

Many years ago, in the bazaar of Baghdad where one can buy any number of interesting things, I purchased Abdel, a young boy who had been trained by a master thief to pick pockets, climb like a monkey, and slip into the shadows. The small thief had grown into a slender young man, dark-faced, but handsome for all of that. But he had never quite learned when tact was required.

"Indeed you did. But now we must change her mind. Go after her. Sympathize with her plight. Perhaps you can persuade her that marrying a king is not such a horrible fate."

I watched as Abdel ran after the princess. They were old friends, she and Abdel. The same age, they learned to play gwai-gai at the same time. True, their stations in life were very different, but Abdel was a clever lad and the princess appreciated his jokes, his wry observations about the court. And he was a practical lad—if anyone could convince her to marry Alarack without a fuss, he was the one.

I traveled to the Emperor's court as a young man, barely twenty years of age. At the time, I was serving a knight who quested after a magic sword that he had read of in an ancient scroll. The knight and I traveled east into the Emperor's lands, and came to be captured by a band of the Emperor's men. My master, an arrogant man, had refused to bow to the Emperor and had lost his head as a result. I, being of a more pragmatic mind, had bowed deeply, prostrating myself in an effort to remain alive.

My efforts were successful. Intrigued by my light skin and peculiar language, the Emperor gave me to the care of the royal dwarf. I became a sort of intelligent pet, learning to tumble, juggle, and work sleight of hand to amuse the Emperor and his family. I learned to speak Mandarin, to play gwai-gai, to minister to minor ailments with herbs and powders, and to keep silent when silence was needed.

Twenty years I lived in the Emperor's court, twenty years during which my homeland came to seem a distant paradise. And when at last I asked the Emperor for his leave to journey again to my homeland, so that I might spread the knowledge of his wisdom to the barbarians, he granted his permission.

The homeland to which I returned was not the paradise I recalled. It was a dirty place, and even the aristocrats believed the most outlandish drivel about magic and sorcery. And the wars seemed constant—always a squabble with this kingdom or that; knights doing battle and trampling the peasants' fields in the process.

Still, I had made the best of it, finding a place for myself at the court of King Marek, Princess Janeka's father. The King had such a childlike trust in magic. He had accepted me as his court wizard on little more than my word, a few sleight of hand tricks—disappearing coins and kerchiefs, and the like—and an assortment of fireworks that I had brought from the Emperor's court. Tame dragons, I had called them. And for the past decade, I had done what I could to keep the peace.

* * *

"The Princess does not care for this match," the King said, looking troubled. We stood in his chambers, beside the open window. From here, we could look down into the courtyard. I preferred to stand by the window, where the wind could rush in, carrying the clean scents of spring.

"She is headstrong," I told him. "Beautiful and clever, but accustomed to getting her own way. That's not a good trait in a woman. A princess must marry for the benefit of the kingdom."

The King shook his head again. He was a bluff honest soldier, better suited to the battlefield than to the machinations of politics. Left to his own devices, he would have fought King Alarack on the field of honor, simply because it would never occur to him to arrange an alliance.

"Perhaps," he suggested delicately, "you could turn her head with a spell. A love potion?"

"When I came to court, you asked me to vow that I would never cast a spell over the members of your family. I agreed to that vow, Your Highness. If you would have me break it . . ."

"Of course not," he said quickly. "Never mind. She will simply have to get used to the idea."

He glanced out the window, hearing the creaking of the castle gate. There was a flurry of activity in the courtyard below us as the princess's hunting party entered: Princess Janeka, Lady Sylvia of Morlaine, and two young guards. The princess wore a forest green hunting dress and carried her bow slung across her saddle.

"She rides like a man," the King said, looking down at his daughter. "And hunts like a goddess."

He had no sons and so he had spoiled her. Taught her to ride and to hunt, stopping short only of teaching her to fight. No surprise that she was stubborn and willful.

"Such a small hunting party," I murmured. "Is that safe? With the robbers in the forest?"

A band of wild men—landless knights, warriors who had disgraced themselves, vagabonds of all sorts—lived in the royal forest. Sometimes, they attacked merchants on their way to market or wealthy courtiers traveling the forest road.

"No worry," the King said. "Just last week, I led the royal guard against them. We captured a few; the rest fled south. Surely you heard."

"Of course," I said. Without a war to fight, the King expended his energy against whatever enemies he could find. I rarely paid much mind. Better he chase robbers than attempt to meddle in court affairs. "I'm sure it was a splendid battle."

The King shook his head. "It's strange. No matter how carefully we plan, the robbers seem to slip our trap. It is as if they know our every move before we make it."

I bowed my head to hide a smile. Of course they knew his every move. He shared his strategy with the Captain of the Guard who told the men who told the serving girls, and it should come as no surprise that the robbers knew. "Of course they know, Your Highness. I am confident that they are in league with the Witch of the Woods."

"Of course," the King rumbled. "That would explain it."

The Witch of the Woods was my own invention, created for those occasions when sleight of hand was not enough. Sometimes, a wizard must work actual magic. I did my best—one can do a great deal with bribery and careful attention to detail. But sometimes, all my intrigues failed and I needed to explain that failure. Hence, the Witch of the Woods, an imaginary crone who lived in the dark reaches of the Royal Forest, and worked black magic to oppose my benign spells. Shortly after I invented her and told the court of her existence, peasants began reporting that they had seen her: she had poisoned their cattle or blighted their potatoes or bewitched their daughters. And all the Court came to believe in her.

"Even so, despite the interference of the Witch, we cleaned out that rat's nest where the robbers lived," the King rumbled. "They had been harassing honest merchants for too long. It was quite a chase." He began a detailed account of the operation, explaining his strategy and its execution.

I smiled and nodded, while watching the hunting party dismount. The Princess was talking to a stable boy. As I watched, she handed something to the boy. Lady Sylvia touched the princess's arm, and Janeka looked up. I lifted my hand in a wave of greeting, but the two women turned away.

The princess frequently went hunting in the afternoon, I thought, listening with half an ear to the King's account of the raid on the robber camp. Often with a small party. But she had never been bothered by robbers. It seemed odd, thinking about it now. I watched the stable boy lead the princess's horse to the stables.

A short time later, as the King considered aloud how he might modify his strategy for the next raid, the stable boy emerged from the stable, leading a horse. He mounted and rode out the gate, turning his horse to the south.

There is only one road that leads to the south, and I sent Abdel in pursuit of the stable boy. I was interested in any messages that the princess had to send.

Abdel had not yet returned when I was summoned by the Queen. She often called on me to cure her of demons brought on by excessive consumption of spicy foods. I treated her with soda water, supplemented, for effect, with amulets and chanting.

But on this occasion, she was not in need of medication. She sat on her couch with a thick book beside her, frowning down at the small type. "Wizard," she greeted me. "We must change the date of the wedding."

I tilted my head, indicating my willingness to listen.

"The wedding is set for the day after the full moon," she said.

"Of course," I agreed. "A most auspicious time."

"But Lady Sylvia has called my attention to this book of wedding customs." The Queen glanced at Lady Sylvia, who stood beside her couch. "There's a problem."

I smiled at Lady Sylvia, and she smiled unconvincingly. Lady Sylvia had a long memory and a limited capacity to forgive. More than a year ago, she had fallen in love with a handsome knight. I knew of it, of course—court gossip often comes to my attention; I never know when it will be useful. It did not matter to me that she loved a knight, rather than her husband—but the knight was dangerously skilled on the jousting field. In a tournament, he was to fight a man who wore an Amulet of Invincibility, which I had provided.

With my reputation as a wizard at stake, I had to remove the threat to my client's invincibility. Abdel, at my instructions, had planted a jewel-encrusted dagger, stolen from the King's own stores, among the knight's belongings. While he was at it, he lifted a packet of letters. The packet included a number of most indiscreet letters from Lady Sylvia.

When my magical powers revealed the presence of the stolen dagger among the knight's possessions, the knight was, of course, disgraced and banished and did not fight in the tournament. I understand he joined the robbers in the forest. And I let Lady Sylvia know—through the grapevine of court gossip—that I knew of her liaison. If I ever needed her assistance, I knew how I could obtain it. Lady Sylvia's husband, the Lord of Morlaine, was not a forgiving man.

But in the Queen's chambers, Lady Sylvia smiled at me. The Queen was squinting at the page, tapping her finger on it impatiently. "Here, Sylvia, you read this," she said. "The letters swim before my eyes."

Lady Sylvia read aloud: "The moon symbolizes the bride, it being the symbol of all things female. If a woman marries when the moon is growing thin, she too will grow thin. But if she marries when the moon is growing fat, she too will grow fat, big with child."

Lady Sylvia looked up from the book and the queen peered at me anxiously. "It would be very bad luck to marry at the wrong time of the moon."

"Ah, yes, but there are countervailing forces, my Queen," I said. I talked for a time about the stars and their positions, about the ebb of the tide, the power of the constellations. She was not listening; she was caught by the image of the moon and the desire for a grandchild.

"But the moon," she said. "Can't you find another time when the stars are good and the moon is waxing?"

I bowed my head to the inevitable. "As you wish, Your Highness." I smiled at her. "I will do so immediately."

Did I tell you—there is a book of rules for gwai-gai, written in the picture language of the Far East. During my time in the Emperor's court, I transcribed it into a more readable script. I have the only copy. It is more than three hundred pages in length, and contains rules that apply in the most obscure of circumstances. A diligent player will search for a rule that applies to a particular thorny situation. On the day before a full moon, a certain move is permitted; on the day after, it is expressly forbidden. Some rules are contradictory; others apply to situations that may arise once in a player's lifetime. A clever player cites the rules that are useful at any given time, ignoring them the rest of the time.

The princess did not know all the rules of gwai-gai, but she had absorbed the principle: If you search long enough, there is almost always a rule that you can turn to your advantage. She had sought to delay the wedding and she had succeeded—but I did not know to what end.

The following day, Abdel returned to court with the answer. When the boy stopped to water his horse at an inn, Abdel had stolen the letter from the stable boy's pouch. He copied it over while the boy ate and returned it, unnoticed, to the saddlebag.

It was a hasty note to the leader of the robbers: "My father has betrothed me to King Alarack. We will wed within the month. It is time to execute our plan. Meet me at the usual place."

"It seems the princess is in love," I said to Abdel.

He nodded. "You could interpret it so."

"She has always been a rebellious child," I said. "No doubt she plans to run away. She has sent her message and she has arranged to delay the wedding. And now she must wait. We will do the same."

Abdel inclined his head in acquiescence.

In gwai-gai, waiting is a part of the game. You wait for your opponent to reveal his strategy; you conserve your energy and wait for the moment to act. I had learned to wait in the Emperor's Court, and I was very good at it.

The Princess did not know how to wait quietly. She spent her mornings in her chambers. According to her chambermaids (I told you court gossip could be useful), she gazed out the window as if watching for a message. In the afternoons, she went hunting in the Royal Forest.

During this period, I sent Lady Sylvia a message she could not ignore—an excerpt from one of her own letters—along with a request that she meet me in a corridor near the kitchen. I waited in the chosen spot at the appointed time. In the silence, I could hear water dripping somewhere far away. Sometimes, I heard the rustling of vermin, the squeaking of rats conferring on matters of grave importance. The castle is riddled with corridors like this, passages that are not so much secret as forgotten, unused except by rats and conspirators. One can wander from the throne room to the kitchen, from the grand hall to the dungeons, following narrow passageways, climbing twisting stairs, slipping unseen behind the tapestries that cover the castle's stone walls.

I chose this meeting place for its ambience: the stink of mold and the scurrying of rats would encourage Lady Sylvia to speak quickly and honestly. When I heard footsteps on the flagstones—hesitating on the stairs—I withdrew into an alcove, stepping from the shadows only when Lady Sylvia approached. She held a single candle and wore a plain cloak. She stopped where she stood, meeting my gaze.

"Lady Sylvia," I said genially. "How kind of you to come."

She watched me, remaining silent.

"I understand that Princess Janeka plans to run away with the leader of the robbers," I said, watching her face.

Her eyes flickered—a fleeting expression that I could not read crossed her face.

"You don't need to confirm that," I said. "I saw a letter to him in her own hand."

"What do you want from me?" she asked, her voice low and filled with passion. "Haven't I been humiliated enough?"

I studied her face. "Of course," I said, understanding suddenly. The leader of the robbers was the knight who had once loved Lady Sylvia and for whom she had sacrificed so much. "She has taken your lover."

Lady Sylvia did not speak.

"I need only a little information," I said softly. "Tell me where they are to meet in the forest, and I will do the rest."

"What will you do?"

"I will capture the robbers and the Princess Janeka will not run away with your lover."

"Instead he will die in the battle," she said bitterly. "Or rot in the dungeon."

"Not at all," I said. "I swear, he will not be harmed. And after the wedding, the King will pardon him—I'll see to that. I can prove that he never stole the dagger, that he should not have been banished. All will be well."

She looked up at me, her face suddenly hopeful.

"Just tell me where they will meet."

She nodded and gave me directions that would lead to the rendezvous.

"You won't harm him?" she asked anxiously.

"All will be well," I repeated.

She turned away then, pulling the hood of her cloak up to cover her face. I could see her shoulders shaking beneath the cloak. "And you will be rewarded," I said. "For your virtue and your service to the kingdom."

She ran away down the corridor, overcome with emotion. I followed more slowly, planning my next move.

I heard that the robbers had returned to the Royal Forest. How did I hear? Simply enough. Abdel had friends among the chambermaids and kitchen help. He brought them love potions, when they asked, and performed minor tasks in the kitchen, in a friendly sort of way. One of the girls who worked in the kitchen had a sister who worked as a serving maid at the inn in the village. The serving maid had a lover who cut wood in the forest and consorted, now and again, with the band of robbers. The lover mentioned the robbers' return to the serving maid, who mentioned it to her sister, who told the cook, who told Abdel, who told me. Information is freely available, for those who know where to look.

That afternoon, I arranged for a company of the Royal Guards to go for a ride in the forest. I did not join them—unlike the King, I prefer to avoid military adventures. But the Captain of the Guard was kind enough to bring the princess to my tower when they returned with the robbers in chains. She stood by the window, her head held high.

"My father will have your head for this," she said.

"For what?" I asked. "For rescuing you from the robbers?"

"I was there of my own free will."

"And how will you explain that to your father? You consort with the vagabonds who live in the forest and defy his rule? I don't think so."

She was silent.

"You know," I said casually, "if you marry King Alarack without a fuss, I'll arrange for clemency."

"And if not?"

"If not . . ." I shrugged. "I imagine that your father would like to see them hang. Particularly the leader."

She looked away, avoiding my gaze.

"What do you think, Princess?"

"I think that it would be a pity to hang men before a royal wedding," she said softly. "Perhaps a pardon would be in order."

"Of course," I said. "As you wish, Your Highness. I'll arrange for a pardon right after the wedding. And perhaps Your Highness could find a wedding custom that would allow us to move the wedding date up. It would be unfortunate to let the men languish in prison any longer than is necessary."

For the next week, the castle buzzed with preparations for the wedding. I saw little of the princess but Abdel kept an eye on her at my request. He made himself useful—assisting in the kitchen, hanging flower garlands in the grand hall.

And at last the afternoon of the wedding came. The lords and ladies stood on either side of long oaken tables, already set for the wedding feast with flagons of ale and hearty red wine, platters for the roasted meats that would be brought from the kitchen. The great hall was an enormous drafty room with a vaulted ceiling. Tapestries covered the stone walls; they depicted elaborate scenes of dubious artistic quality: men hunting amid tangles of trees; two mounted knights running at each other full tilt (across some poor peasant's potato field, no doubt); a muscular warrior doing battle with an anemic dragon. Above the tapestries were windows—ordinarily shuttered to close out the winter chill, now open to the air. Great garlands of flowers were draped from the ceiling to the open windows. The flowers' perfume hung heavy in the air. In the center of each table, a cage of larks trilled and chirped.

I stood at the back of the hall, watching as the King led Princess Janeka, a slim figure clad entirely in white, to the front of the hall. Her hands were gloved; her face was veiled. Only a few gold curls peeked from beneath the heavy veil to reveal her identity. King Alarack waited at the front of the room.

When the princess reached his side, the minister, a small pale man, took her gloved hand and placed it in King Alarack's. The pair knelt before him.

From the distance, I couldn't hear the words—just a lot of mumbling and an occasional "God" or "Amen." The ceremony seemed interminable—a man of little power in the court, the minister was determined to make his moment of glory last. I found myself rocking back on my heels, admiring the garlands that festooned the hall. I caught a glimpse of a movement at a high window. A bird, perhaps.

The minister mumbled and the wedding couple got to their feet. King Alarack turned to Princess Janeka, reaching to lift her veil and kiss her, the kiss that would seal the matrimonial bargain. Before he could touch her, I heard a howling cry, like the wailing of the monkeys that inhabit the sacred temples of the East. A man clad in forest green leapt from the window, caught hold of a flower garland, and swung over the heads of the assembled lords and ladies to snatch up the princess and carry her with him. His flight took them to the head of the master table.

And suddenly the room was filled with green-clad men, howling like monkeys, a cacophony of whoops and shrieks that drowned out the orders of the Captain of the Royal Guard. They emerged from behind the tapestries, having crept unseen down secret ways. The men of the Royal Guard turned to do battle—lifting their battle pikes, drawing their swords, shouldering their heavy staffs—but the ladies were screaming and the lords (every one of them a fighting man in his own estimation) were charging toward the intruders. Trying to help, but what help was it to a fighting man to have a lord flourishing his bejeweled ceremonial sword between you and the ragged men in green who were howling and rushing helter skelter through the room, bowling over screaming women who fell in tangles of skirts and hoops that tripped you when you tried to follow? There wasn't enough room to swing a staff without clouting a lord in the head, and there would be hell to pay for knocking a lord arse over teakettle. And of course there were Alarack's men, who rushed into the fracas, caring less for the aristocratic skulls of the local lords. The Captain of Alarack's honor guards swung his staff at a robber who ducked. The weapon caught a member of the King's Royal Guard upside the back of the head—and then there was a brawl within the greater battle, between the members of the rival guards.

And through it all, the leader, the slim man who swung down to snatch the princess, was running down the center table, along the very top of it, through the elegantly arranged dishes. Careless of crystal and fine china, he kicked over flagons of wine that splashed on the ladies' gowns, causing more screaming that rose above the chorus of animal howls. There was something familiar about this man—his face was smeared with charcoal—a fright mask to disguise his identity. I couldn't place him just then, as he dragged the princess behind him, right shoe sending a bottle of wine tumbling into the lap of an elderly woman who began to bellow on a low note, like an ox with its tail in a knot. His left foot knocked over a cage of larks. The birds flew from the broken cage and the dogs (there were always dogs in the castle, lying beneath the tables and waiting for bones) barked and gave chase.

It seemed to me that the princess could have resisted more strenuously. She was a strapping lass, but he hauled her along the tabletop, her kicking feet destroying what little the man had left untouched. I could see the leader clearly as he reached the end of the table and I stared as he leapt down. He grinned in my direction. The princess had lost a shoe in the journey down the tabletop, and her white stocking was torn. For an instant, I caught a glimpse of the royal ankle—a startling dusky ankle.

But it was only a glimpse. The Captain of the Royal Guard was close behind them, having fought his way through screaming women and barking dogs to reach the back of the hall. For a moment, I thought he might catch them. But before I could cry out, the robber pushed the bride into the arms of a waiting robber, then rushed toward me. He slipped behind me, placing me between him and the Captain, and flung a muscular forearm across my throat, pulling me backward and cutting off my wind. I felt the point of a dagger bite into my ribs.

"Stay quiet, Wizard," Princess Janeka's voice said softly in my ear, so softly that only I could hear. "Or I'll gut you like a chicken."

The Captain of the Guard hesitated, his sword drawn, unwilling to attack with me in the way. In that moment, the princess shoved me forward, moving suddenly and pushing low against my back so that I tripped over my own robes and sprawled forward, arms outstretched to catch myself, and I inadvertently took the Captain down with me.

The robbers got away, of course, clean away. There were horses waiting at the open gate. And someone had released all the other horses from the stable so that no one could give chase. All the stable boys were at a party—arranged by Princess Janeka to reward them for faithful service. It took hours to round up all the horses, and then of course it was too late. The robbers were long gone.

Lady Sylvia, according to her maids-in-waiting, was inconsolable. I tried to speak with her—it seemed she had been the only lady attending the princess as she dressed for the wedding. But that evening she would receive no one. She was weeping, they said, for Princess Janeka. And the next day, she was gone, leaving a note that caused the King to search the moat for her body.

And Abdel was missing as well. No one had seen him anywhere. Suspicion, confusion, and mystery.

Of course, I blamed the entire misadventure on the Witch of the Woods, my convenient enemy, and the Royal Guard searched the forest for any sign of the witch or the robbers. I did not mention the identity of the robber who had captured the bride—in the East, I had learned when it was wise to remain silent, and this seemed to be one of those times. At the King's request, I retired to my chambers to work a spell that would guarantee the princess's safety.

I found myself sitting beside the game board, studying the identical pieces of the gwai-gai set. It was a lovely game, complex and intriguing. Did I mention that you never know what is happening until after the game is over? A queen can masquerade as a pawn. A princess can cut her hair short and swing down a rope to rescue a thief who is dressed as a bride. The possibilities are endless. One must not allow one's imagination to be limited.

Three nights after the wedding, I woke to the sound of Princess Janeka's voice. "Wizard," she said softly. "I came to say goodbye."

"How did you get in here?" I asked, still groggy with sleep.

"I have a cloak of invisibility," she said. "I slipped past the guards."

"There's no such thing," I said. "You came in through a secret way."

She shrugged and smiled brightly. I saw the flash of her teeth in the moonlight. "As you like."

More awake now, I sat up in my bed. "It's a pity you hacked off your hair. It was really quite lovely."

She ran a hand through what was left of her hair, now cropped short as a boy's. "I never cared for it. Abdel says that we can sell the braids to a wig maker."

"Most likely you can." Light from the waning moon shone in the window, illuminating her face. I studied her across the room. "You said you came to say goodbye. Where are you going?"

"To explore the Far East. I thought I'd tell you," she said. "After all, you've taught me so much."

"I could call for the guards," I said. "I could capture you now and we could have a wedding after all."

She smiled in the darkness. "I'd be gone before they got here." She sat on the edge of the divan, crossing one leg over the other and making herself quite at home. "Besides, if you did that, you'd never learn the answers to the questions you want to ask." She paused, but I did not speak.

"That fellow, Lady Sylvia's knight—he wasn't making love to me, there in the forest," she told me. "He was teaching me to fight. I do believe I have a knack for it. Other than that, he's really not my type. Not a very clever man."

"Abdel, on the other hand, is a clever young man."

"That he is."

"But don't you think you'll grow bored with an untutored thief, however clever?"

She stared at me, then laughed. "Why is it that men always think in terms of either this man or that. Just now, it's neither. I've been a bit too busy for that."

I shook my head. "I don't see why you needed to do all this."

She shrugged. "If I ran away on the eve of my wedding, I would be in disgrace and King Alarack would be shamed and there'd be no way back. But as I've been kidnapped my parents will welcome me joyously, with feasting and song when I return."

"Certainly being kidnapped by robbers will excuse your absence for a time. But the journey to the East will take years. How will you explain that?"

"That's where you come in." She smiled at me dreamily. "The Witch of the Woods has cast a spell," she said. "Tell my father that you've learned that I have been magicked into a deep sleep, from which I will awaken only when the moment is right."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because they'll believe it. Tell my father what he wants to believe—tell him about magic and wizardry and the inexplicable powers of darkness."

"Perhaps."

"Oh, don't sound so doubtful. You'll do fine. I've given you the basic tale—take it and embroider it as you please." She cocked her head, watching me. "There really is a Witch of the Woods, by the way. She gave me my cloak of invisibility. Quite a powerful old woman. You'd best be careful in your dealings with her."

"I see."

"You know, Sylvia says I should slit your throat, but my father needs you. Left to his own devices, the place would be at war in a year. You'll keep things peaceable because you like them that way."

"That's true. I do prefer peace."

"Oh, stop rubbing your throat. I told you—I won't do it now. Take care of the kingdom, Wizard. Or I'll come back and slit your throat when you least expect it."

And then she was gone, leaving me alone in the darkness. She slipped into the shadows, I think. In any case, I lost sight of her.

I sat in my bed, thinking about magic and intrigue. She was going to the East, where gwai-gai was created, and she might return with new rules. Or she might not. She might be telling me this to lull me into a sense of security, so that she could attack when I was unaware. Duplicity, thy name is woman.

I laughed. I had not known how well I had trained the princess. It was truly wonderful. I rose from my bed and went to the window. Below me, under the full moon, a figure on a horse rode away. I could call out the guard, but she had a plan for that, I was certain. She would tumble into the ditch and creep away, disguise herself and escape. I simply watched her go and smiled, knowing that she would be back.

In the meantime, I would explain matters to the court. The sleeping spell—that was good. There was precedent for that. I would say that my magic mirror showed her sleeping peacefully in a secret grotto, concealed from human view. I glanced at the game board beside my bed, the pieces still in the positions that the princess and I had left them. She had always been an unorthodox player. I settled back to concoct a story to tell the King. ●

A few years ago, the author spent some time in Venice doing research for a novella that never quite came together. Giving up on that project, Mr. Swanwick created a life mask of his wife and adorned it with the pieces of a four-hundred-word tale he had written from the earlier material. "The Mask" is an expanded version of the story that still hangs on his living-room wall.

THE MASK

Michael Swanwick

art: Karl F. Huber

This is a story they tell in the Communes: That one evening the Lady Nakashima paused atop the Rialto to admire the view, her cloak billowing as if in a breeze, and was accosted by a drunken German.

Holographic dragons curled in the air over the gondolas and vaporetti, winking in and out of existence as unseen technicians tuned their projectors for some minor festival. A bison, the lions of Saint Mark, the author of the *Commedia.* The Lady Nakashima let them fade from her consciousness. She had much to think about. ZeissOptik had filed a logo-infringement suit against one of Nakashima Commune's subsidiaries. An instability in the currency markets was holding up a planned expansion into Brazilian farm biologicals. Just that afternoon, Household had discovered Yoshio, her youngest, accessing Malaysian cock-fighting magazines. Something would have to be done, and quickly, to nip this unhealthy appetite in the bud. She also had a business dinner to plan.

"*Fuorisola* witch!" A heavy-set man gripped her arm. "I've found you at last."

"You mistake me."

Her voice was as cool and emotionless as the smooth white mask all corporate chiefs wore in public to thwart kidnappers. But the man would not let go of her, would not listen. "Betrayed!" he sobbed. "How could I have been so stupid? What a fool I was to believe you!" His breath stank of Scotch and grappa.

486 gigaK of interactivity were woven into the Lady Nakashima's cloak. She was not afraid of the man's obvious strength. "In what way have you been betrayed?" Her mask relayed subvocalized commands to her security forces along with an image of his red face and close-cropped head. He is the engineer Gerhardt Betelheimer, they told her, a defector from Green Hamburg, sponsored for citizenship by the Ritter Commune.

"I have lost family, friends, and homeland, all for the love of you."

"Who do you think I am?"

"Bitch! I know you all right."

"I am not she."

He carried a fragmentation pistol; her mask showed his hand, thrust deep within his overcoat, clutching it convulsively. Her political section said he had been recruited by the Lady Christiaana, her ally and sometimes rival in many enterprises. Security directed her to keep him talking. "Were you not well paid?" she asked.

Betelheimer shook his head bullishly. "I never wanted money."

"Everybody wants money."

The rhythm of the passing crowds changed ever so slightly as her people eased into position. Maria Delgado had often boasted that her antiterrorist unit was the best on the continent. Now she was proving it. The day-officer urged the Lady Nakashima to draw free of her accoster; her cloak was too subtle a defense to protect her from his crude weapon.

She stood her ground. "If not money," she insisted, "then what is it you want? A position, perhaps? The chance to employ your talents to the fullest?"

Betelheimer stared stupidly at her. His heart rate, perspiration, and mental indices soared. A squat woman with a thin, greasy moustache paused nearby and reached casually into her shopping bag. The Lady Nakashima silently warned her away. "All I ever asked of you was one night. Not even that—an hour! I traded all I had for a taste of something you never meant to give." He began to pull the gun from his pocket. "Now you can watch me die!"

An artist by the canal took down his canvas and folded the easel, pointing it casually toward the bridge; three schoolgirls ran laughing through the crowd, silver glints in their hands; an enormously fat African nobody could ever have felt threatened by lumbered up smiling.

Stand clear! the day-officer cried.

But the Lady Nakashima did not stand clear, but rather stilled the German's hand, saying, "I will keep my word."

He looked at her long and hard. "Not fucking likely," he said at last.

"Release me," she commanded. "Take my arm as a gentleman would. There is a pensione not far from here which we maintain for visiting dignitaries. I will take you there."

His hand slowly unclenched. He rocked on his heels with doubt and suspicion. But his instant of resolution had passed. There was nothing for him to do but go along.

The Lady Nakashima led him away from the Grand Canal and through the narrow calles and sottoportegas of San Polo. Night was falling. For all the people in the streets, she could hear the wind over the rooftops and the chirping of sparrows. One by one the church bells began to chime. She crossed herself.

Betelheimer snorted derisively.

"I am constantly amazed by you Continentals," she said with a touch of asperity. "When your pious, horrified-by-profit representatives come here to negotiate contracts, the first thing they do is visit the casinos. They bet more money than they can afford to lose, and they indulge in drugs they would never tolerate in their own territories. They hire prostitutes of the basest sort. It never occurs to one of you to attend Mass."

Political reported that Betelheimer had been involved in power-plant design. He had defected a month ago, leaving behind a wiped laboratory core and many angry colleagues. The Lady Christiaana had completed a tour of vassal corporations in the German Green States and Denmark shortly before. Her people had filed seven related patents since. Industrial espionage with seduction was deemed all but certain.

How valuable are these patents? she asked.

The question was kicked over to Jean-Luc Chicouenne in Marketing Analysis. So-so, he said with a Gallic curl of the lips that she could hear in his voice. A few technical flourishes. A useful twist or two.

"I don't give a damn about your Papist superstitions," the German said.

"The more fool you, then."

Espionage was considered sharp practice among the *fuorisoli* but nothing more, a minor vice that everyone dabbled in from time to time. And the Lady Christiaana was notorious for her flirtations. Most likely she had turned Gerhardt Betelheimer out of simple boredom.

They entered a courtyard where a Noguchi fountain, acquired at enormous cost from a bankrupt government collective in Duluth, sent sweet water laughing into the air. Sixth-generation filtration systems were the single greatest contribution the new era had given the city and as a result fountains were popular endowments. Down a calle no wider than a doorway was the home of one of the Commune's junior vice-presidents. His family had been removed, she was told. The rooms had been swept and secured. She was to go up the stairs and to the left. Her people had arranged fresh sheets and flowers.

"I want you naked," Betelheimer growled. He was only dimly visible in the gloom. The springs groaned when he fell onto the bed. He pulled off his clothes quickly, angrily, throwing his boots noisily across the room. The Lady Nakashima undressed more slowly, more deliberately.

"May I retain my mask?"

"I don't give a shit if I never see your face again."

The last of her clothing whispered to the floor. Against Security's objections, she put the cloak aside. She powered down her mask; it was only a mask now. Betelheimer grinned nastily as she knelt down on the bed.

"That's more like—" Reaching for her, he clumsily knocked a framed picture from the end-table. Petit-bourgeois reflexes kicked in and he leaned over to retrieve it. It was a steelpoint portrait of Dante Alighieri.

Betelheimer's brows knitted. "It's that damned allegorist again. His fucking picture is everywhere in this town. Why?" She said nothing. "I asked you a question, whore! He never lived here—he was a goddamned Florentine. What is he to you?"

"He was a *fuoriuscito*," the Lady Nakashima said quietly. "An exile. His political enemies had expelled him from his own city. He was a man who understood the pain of loss. Like us."

Something in her voice burned through the German's haze of alcohol and self-pity. Brusquely, he swung up a hand to trip a switch-beam.

Light flared.

The Lady Nakashima was of a height with the Lady Christiaana, but that was all. The light revealed her ten-years-older breasts, her softening belly, her heavier thighs, her shorter legs. Sober, Gerhardt Betelheimer could never have confused the two.

He stared up in horror. "You're not her!"

"So I told you."

She looked down at his stocky torso, his round and pinkish stomach, with mingled compassion and disdain. His face was a parody of remorse; he was capable only of the extremes of emotion, it seemed, anger or anguish but nothing in between. His hands tried to cover his erect penis. It bounced free of them, like a ridiculous rubber toy. "You're not her," he repeated. "Oh God. Oh God. Forgive me, I—I mistook you for somebody else."

She touched his lips with one cool finger.

"Your lady made a promise. I will keep it for her." A gesture dimmed the lights, returning the mask of twilight to the room. Reaching into darkness, she moved his hands to her hips.

"But why?" he asked.

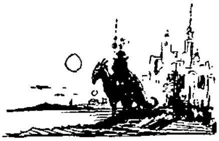
"What binds one of us," she said, "binds us all."

And she did for him as had been promised.

For this was the Lady Nakashima honored in the boardrooms and palazzos, and by her husband as well. Gerhardt Betelheimer found work with the Bache-Rockefeller Commune, and in later years rose high in the councils of Venice. The Lady Christiaana was censured for her part in the affair, a setback that took her most of a decade to recover from.

This is a story the *fuorisoli* tell, and here is the lesson they wish you to take away from it: They lost Manhattan; they lost Japan; they lost Britain and Hong Kong and Taiwan out of the folly of their arrogance. When anticorporate ideologies first swept the globe, they relied entirely on hirelings and employees to fight their battles. They did not accept responsibility. They enjoyed the fruit that others had planted, and thus it was taken away from them. But this final island they would *not* lose.

Here they would make their stand. ●

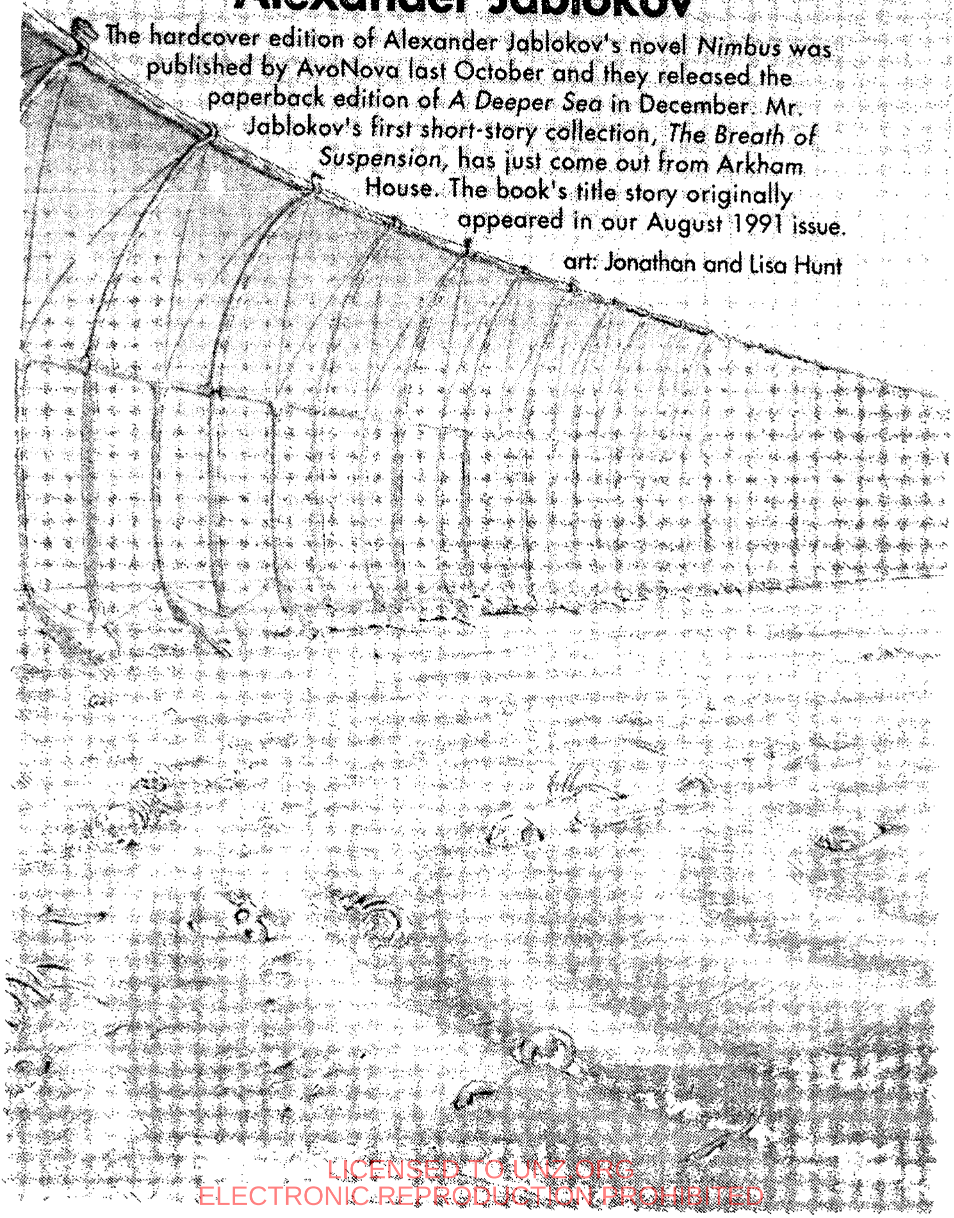


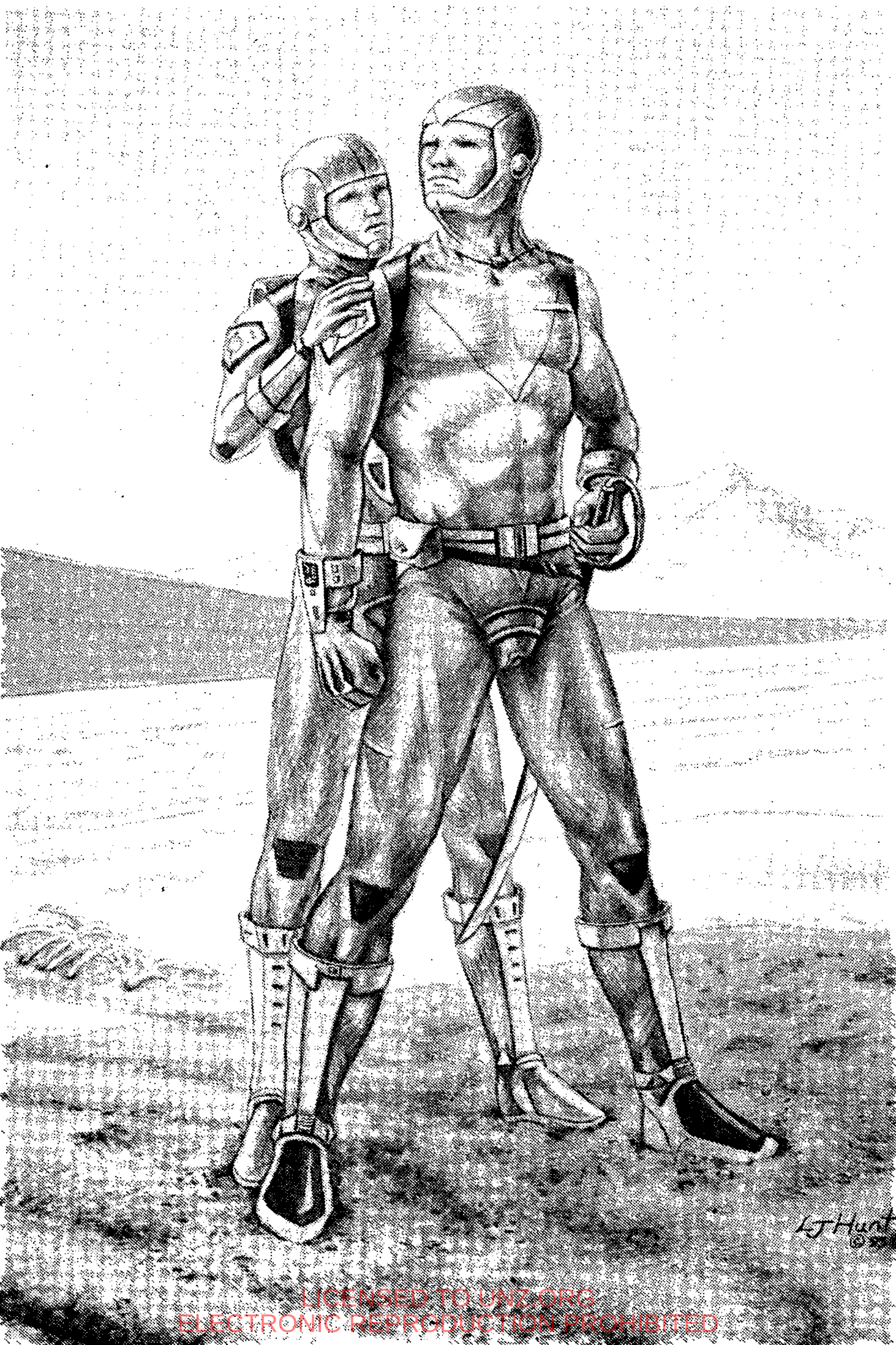
SYRTIS

Alexander Jablokov

The hardcover edition of Alexander Jablokov's novel *Nimbus* was published by AvoNova last October and they released the paperback edition of *A Deeper Sea* in December. Mr. Jablokov's first short-story collection, *The Breath of Suspension*, has just come out from Arkham House. The book's title story originally appeared in our August 1991 issue.

art: Jonathan and Lisa Hunt




LJ Hunt

"You fell off that thing once," Hektor observed. "I thought you were dead for sure." He squinted over his arm, then switched his gesture to another, more distant, rock outcrop, as if the narrow focus of his pointing finger brought the past back more clearly.

"I didn't fall." Breyten pressed his chest against the rock wall and stretched his arms along it, as if embracing it. "I jumped."

"Just as dead, either way."

"I'm not dead."

"Pure luck, that."

"Without luck you're nothing, on Mars." Breyten jumped up lightly, hooked his fingertips over a narrow ledge that had been invisible to Hektor, and pulled himself up with one smooth movement.

It had been a long time since they'd been out together in the grabens of the Noctis Labyrinthus. A complex network of steep-sided faults caused by the geologic uplift of the whole region between Tharsis and Valles Marineris, the Labyrinth had been their favorite area of exploration since they were old enough to pilot a crawler out from the Passman mansion at the end of Tithonium Chasma. Several of their childhood companions had died in rock falls. A younger sister, Maria, never talked about at home, had been smashed flat by the toppling of a rock slab so heavy that her body had never been recovered, but this was considered a normal part of Martian maturation, instruction in the fact that both skill *and* luck are necessary to survival.

Breyten jammed his toes into a narrow vertical crack and edged his way upward. He had learned young that the only way to beat his more calculating older brother was through sheer recklessness. He leaned out past an overhang, silhouetted against the pink sky, and then hung out there by one hand, looking down at Hektor. Breyten was thinner than Hektor, fine boned, with hair so pale it sometimes looked white.

"How does it feel to be back?" Breyten asked. "Do you worry about breathing?" He looked mockingly concerned.

Hektor had at that moment been concentrating on the suddenly unfamiliar feel of air sliding in through his throat valves. On Earth, the external tracheal attachments had been matters of curiosity. He'd decorated them, as Martians visiting the home planet did. But now that he was back on Mars, and his life once again depended on them, they felt like two thumbs pressing hard on his throat.

"No," Hektor said. "I worry about falling. I still think the gravity's three times what it actually is." Hektor started the confession as a distraction from his real fear, than realized that this one was real too. He hooked his arm around a sharp rock spike and it dug into the soft skin on the inside of his elbow, through his suit. The overhang Breyten dangled out from wasn't technically difficult, but it suddenly frightened Hektor. The depths of the canyon tugged at his feet.

"You'll get over it. Fall off something, to get used to the gravity. Just don't forget to breathe." Breyten disappeared.

"Thanks," Hektor muttered. He reached up, felt a solid handhold, and pulled himself up the overhang. He was floating, damn it, the gravity was nothing. He could do a swan dive into the canyon, tuck and roll, come up smiling. That sort of overconfidence killed more Martians returning from extended visits to Earth than any breathing problems.

"I've been reading about someone." Breyten was about twenty feet up, and had obviously been waiting for his slowpoke older brother to catch up. "Bertilla Li Pakit."

"Prakrit," Hektor corrected, dredging the obscure name up from some long-neglected memory store.

Breyten looked off down the graben at the huge cracked wall they had, as boys, dubbed the Trellis, supposedly an artifact of the mythical ancient inhabitants of Mars. The brusque correction clearly annoyed him. When they were young, Hektor had always used his two-year's head start to good advantage, bullying and dominating Breyten. Breyten had finally grown old enough to win his own successes, climbing canyon walls faster and wrestling more skillfully than his older brother. So, like any wise older brother, Hektor had changed the rules, making any purely physical competition childish and meaningless. Breyten still smarted under the injustice.

"She tried to take a message from one Nativist base to another during the Uprising," he said. "She breathed all the way out and died."

Hektor desultorily yanked at his school memories of the Martian Nativist Uprising of the early twenty-second century, but got only a handful of random colorful incidents, Prakrit's death among them.

"Stupid war," Hektor said. "Never should have happened. And fortunately it never succeeded in its aims." Breyten forced him to do things like take strong positions on irrelevant historical events, just to maintain dominance. It got tiring.

"Maybe." Breyten had always cherished a romantic view of the Uprising. "But maybe she could have led the fight against Earth. Been a hero. Made us independent, maybe. If she hadn't suffocated out there."

"Sure, Breyten." When they had both been younger, Hektor had told Breyten endless stories of struggling heroes, ranging from Achilles to Aya Ngomo. Some of that seemed to have lodged deeper than expected.

"Then Mars would be different. Safe from Earth." He looked up at the strip of darkening dusty pink overhead and found the glowing dot of Earth. To Hektor the presence of the evening star indicated that they would almost certainly be late to their father's Landing Day party. To Breyten it meant something else. "You can barely see it from here. Why should we owe it such allegiance?"

"It is more correct to say that we and the Terrans, and those on Venus, owe our allegiance to the same thing," Hektor said pedantically, recognizing a pointless discussion when he got involved in one. "The Union of States and Nationalities."

Hektor had just gotten back from two years on Earth as a member of a Union Councillor's staff. The experience had eliminated any illusions he might have had about a monolithic Earth government. Among the shifting tectonic plates of Union politics, Mars was just one more, not any particular subject of oppression.

"Right." Breyten jumped along a narrow ledge like a nervous animal. "But Mars is different. We should balance between."

"Oh, God, Breyten, in a couple of minutes I have to go to the Passman Landing Day do to talk politics with all the Fossic Party. I don't really want to discuss Mars's place in the Union with you out here."

Hektor had worked himself ragged at the Council of Nationalities, gotten to see the Gensek in three-quarters view from a distance of no more than twenty meters, and even participated in a low-level war in Sichuan. He and Breyten were both of an age when the day-to-day accumulation of changes added up to a large sum at the end of two years. He had been hoping to scope out who Breyten was now, but had not gotten anywhere.

"You like talking politics," Breyten observed. "You'll be gabbing about water rights before we're in the door."

"Maybe I will. Speaking of which, we should get back to the crawler. We'll be late."

"There's time." Even as he said this, Breyten stared up at the darkening sky. At that moment he looked just as he had when he was a little boy, his attention focused somewhere beyond the immediately visible. Social affairs had never interested him, perhaps because his more outgoing older brother tended to dominate them. "So watch out. There's more to politics on Mars these days. There's a lot that's different."

"All right," Hektor said. "Things are different. More people are getting killed. So what have you been *doing?*"

"There's someone I want you to meet," Breyten said dreamily. "At the party."

"Really? A woman? Pierre Sanserif has a girlfriend?" The alias was old, part of a childhood game.

"Surprised?" Breyten was serene.

"It had to happen some time."

"Ha."

"Come on then!" Breyten shouted. "I'll race you back by way of Leadbutt Col." He slid perilously down a steep rock face, scattering fragments below him, leaped across a ten-foot fracture, and was off.

"Wait—" Hektor gave it up, slid his behind over a detached boulder, and was after his brother, leaping the dark fractures that filled with the approaching night. He wouldn't catch Breyten, he knew that. Breyten had always been able to navigate the jagged twists and turns of Noctis Labyrinthus better than anyone, and his utter lack of concern for bodily integrity gave him an advantage. But both of them would recognize pure cowardice if, right now, after flexing his sexual muscles, Hektor claimed to be beyond such childish games.

They returned late, scuttling from the sand crawler into the back entrance of the house like dilatory boys, then up to their separate rooms.

When Hektor finally got to the main social room, there were thirty or forty people there. He saw the formally dressed Breyten standing to one side, isolated in the crowd, a stoneware mug of his favorite fetid hot mineral water already in his hand. Breyten raised his white eyebrows as if wondering where the hell Hektor had been. Hektor scowled, grinned, and dove into the crowd.

Water rights did indeed come up. So did the route of the Eos Chasma magtrack, and industrial tax abatements. Hektor found himself as alert as he had been on the rocks. He was one of the new crop of Legislators, elected to a reserved seat from a district dominated by Passman loyalists. He was desperate to prove his suitability for the post. A few conversations, and he realized he'd just created weeks of work for himself.

"Hektor," his father's harsh voice said at his elbow. "Now you've finally arrived, I have someone for you to meet."

Lon Passman was the same height as his sons, but denser, always walking as if deliberately pushing his weight into the floor, a difficult trick in Martian gravity. His hair was thick and white. His sword's scabbard was ancient and scarred, supposedly dating to the earliest days of Martian settlement.

"All right," Hektor said, steeling himself for yet another political contact.

"I'm sure you've already noticed who's here," Lon murmured as they walked. "Have you noticed who isn't?"

"Governor-Resident DeCoven," Hektor said promptly. Lon had been friendly with DeCoven's predecessor, but the new colonial administrator had kept his distance from all Martian political figures.

"He's busy until the Feast of Gabriel," Lon said. "Then he makes a personal appearance. Landing Day's too emotionally fraught for him."

"You could have had some pigeons for him." DeCoven's hobby was pigeon breeding, of all things. His sole contacts with Martians had been limited to people with similar interests. It should have been a charming quirk, but had somehow become an irritation. Politicians had grimly taken up the hobby in the hopes of making personal contact.

"I hate what they do to the furniture." Lon creased his face in a grin. "You knew DeCoven wasn't going to be here. Anyone else? A Martian, if you want a clue."

Even Fatima Weissman was here, a figure prominent in the opposing Chasmic Party and an old Passman family friend. That she was not at the competing Landing Day party at Chasmic Party Chairman Mboya's house was perhaps a statement of personal loyalty but more likely a way of keeping an eye on Fossic Party doings without being obvious about it . . . got it. Got it, by God. The political world was not confined by the mundane polarities of the Fossic and Chasmic Parties.

"Rudolf Hounslow," Hektor said, trying not to sound like an eager student waving his hand with the answer. "You invited him, didn't you?"

"I did." Lon Passman was sour. "His Olympus Clubs are becoming a real nuisance—blossoming from canyon gangs into what starts to look like a genuine revolutionary organization. People are starting to die. I mean, die for specific reasons, someone else's reasons—always a warning sign, in the canyons."

"Did you think you could talk him out of it over a drink?"

"Not at all. A Landing Day party is no place for dramatic confrontations. But I *was* hoping that you and Breyten could see him, get his measure, make some sort of contact."

Hektor found his father's interest in Hounslow's presence odd, and his belief that Hounslow would actually show up even odder. It was not like Lon Passman to expose himself by having unfulfillable expectations.

"What for?"

"Because he's going to be the biggest threat to your future here on Mars. He really should have come." Lon almost whispered the last sentence.

This *was* odd. "I can't see him sitting here, chatting, a drink in his hand."

"Oh, Hounslow's more sociable than you might think, Hektor. He's a fanatic, but he's still a politician."

"Maybe." Hektor was dubious.

He spotted Breyten talking animatedly to . . . a woman, he thought. He glimpsed a slender figure, bright hair. A red dress? Or did that belong to someone standing nearby? He didn't get a chance to check further—his father swept him by before he could see more. But, Breyten, animated? This was much more interesting than the social shortcomings of some two-bit terrorist.

"Nyasa Tso," his father said suddenly. "My son, Hektor Passman." And left. Hektor found himself, completely unexpectedly, confronting a tall woman, almost as tall as he was, with brown eyes, which regarded him with cool, almost contemptuous unconcern.

"I, ah, how do you do?" Hektor bowed, happy that there were fixed social requirements that did not demand thought.

"I'm well." She seemed angry at him, as if he had already offended her. There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Do you climb, there in the Chasma Boreale?" He grabbed the first topic that came to mind.

If she was surprised that he knew where her family was from, she didn't show it. "Of course. It's irresistible. Not nice, stable rock like here, though. Last summer I saw an entire cliff shatter without warning."

He thought of the carbon-dioxide-rotten terraces of millions-of-years-layered dust and water ice that made up the North Polar Cap around Chasma Boreale, and wondered if she was making fun of him. Not an hour before he had been clinging in terror to that nice stable rock of the Labyrinth.

"At least there aren't plants and wild animals," he said. "The Council of Nationalities took over the quarters of the Andes Highlands Assembly at Cuzco, Peru this year. The air was good, about like in this room. Most of the Terrans bitched, said it was too thin."

"Oh, that's right. You were there helping Councillor Borg try to get Governor-Resident DeCoven recalled." Her tone was airily contemptuous.

Despite himself, Hektor flushed. "Among other things."

"She likes to run her sword out of her scabbard so that the Terrans can see its nice shiny Martian blade. A mistake. A Martian mistake. Terrans mislike being threatened by . . . colonists."

"Easy enough to find fault, afterward." He realized that he sounded crabby, exactly like someone who had made a big mistake.

She shrugged. "I don't suppose you had much to say about it, at that."

Hektor wondered at her dislike of him. He didn't enjoy being disliked, particularly by women, but he knew it had to happen occasionally. If he acted as decisively as he intended to in his career, there would be many who hated him. But he preferred to know why.

"Well, I did have to do mostly grunt work." He sighed. "Politics isn't just riding in triumph through Persepolis, you know. You have to sit in endless ward committee meetings with concerned Persepolitans."

"But you think that moment of triumph worth it." She was judicious.

"Victory is a heavy fruit that can only be supported by a strong trunk."

"There are a million metaphorical answers to that one."

"There are, there are. It's my father's phrase. A Terran aphorism, to boot. Though now I've seen fruit trees, and understand it a little better." He shook his head. "I hope I'm not turning into him so soon."

"Oh, that wouldn't be such a bad thing, would it?" Her moment of sympathy seemed to annoy her. She drew herself up. The Tsos were of mixed Chinese-African descent, and her skin was a distinct dark yellow, like clay. "But you have other guests to attend to. Pleased to have met you."

And so, with a cool handshake, she dismissed him. He walked away from her, wondering. He'd started to enjoy talking to her, but something had stood between them. He'd been away from Mars too long. Maybe Breyten would know something about this woman . . . but Breyten was gone. He never lasted for more than an hour at one of these things.

"Ah, Hektor." It was Nar Hansen, mayor of Garmashtown, in Ophir Chasma. "You guys don't seriously intend to grant 65 percent of that new artesian flow to those Hebes buffoons, do you? They just gargle with it and spit it out."

"Come on now, Nar." Hektor said, as cheerily as if the discussion hadn't already taken up most of the past week. "Animal protein production is scarcely gargling."

"You're choking us! We're barely above five hundred days' reserves as it is. . . ."

Pleasing Hansen and his interests in Ophir were key to the next water distribution agreement. But Hektor didn't want to discuss it now. His eyelids felt heavy, and it was still early. He peered over Hansen's shoulder, hoping for release. Hansen was too intent on his arguments to notice.

When he saw her, she seemed like the only other living person in the room. Features glimpsed past backs and gesturing arms—a long-fingered, lacquer-nailed hand with a drink in it, a bare shoulder, red-gold hair, a red dress clinging to a hip—coalesced into a whole, a woman, who stood, isolated from the rest of the party by a now-empty food table. She seemed exasperated by something, abandoned.

"Next week then," Hektor said, agreeing to something just to get away from Hansen. "You can show me the desperate wasteland Ophir has become." Another day given away. A Legislator's time was as cheap as party favors. He walked toward her.

"It's amazing," Hektor said, as if picking up the thread of an interrupted conversation, "how much harder we work at enjoying ourselves than at any real job."

The woman looked at him. Her eyes were dark blue. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I wasn't." He gestured at a chair. "My name is Hektor."

That seemed to amuse her. "I know." She sat down. "Mine is Laia Korvengeld." She held up a warning hand. "But I feel I should warn you: I don't know anything about water rights, regolith ice mining, air pumping, those things."

"That's the best news I've had all night," he said fervently.

She smiled. "Good. Then maybe we can be friends." She poured him a glass of wine. "You know, I've never been to a party like this. You all *work* so hard. All night," she sloshed her wine glass, spilling some, "it's been like watching yeast bounce around turning sugar into votes."

She had fine wrists, and impossibly long fingers. He watched them in fascination. "That's truer than you think," he said. "Like this wine. North Slope, Gangis Chasma. Popular tourist item. Any idea how many tax deals had to be made to have it economic to grow gene-modified vines on Martian rock? The grapes look like little air tanks. You have to crack them to get the juice out."

"So it's true! You never stop. Breyten was right."

Hektor examined her with dismay. The red dress, the blond hair . . . she was the woman he'd seen Breyten talking to earlier. His date, then. And here Hektor had already started to get attracted to her.

"You're here with Breyten, then?"

She laughed. "Not at all. I just know him. I'm here . . . well, on my own."

He took a relieved breath. "Let's get out of here, before someone else finds me. I'll show you the house, if you like."

"Sure." She stood and took his arm. "I'd like that."

Hektor was adept at giving house tours, having been trained to it from childhood. It was full of Martian history. Emblems of famous duels hung on the walls. An early exploration vehicle with wide spring tires stood in the garage.

"What a weight of time," Laia said wonderingly.

"It's not full of millennia of history, like some Terran Houses I've seen."

"Oh, they can keep their old junk, and spend their time dusting it. Maybe it'll keep them from bothering us."

So she did have her political positions, after all. "Most Terran Households are no older than this one, of course. They just pretend they're older, hauling in old foundations and playing like they've been there for centuries. But we really *do* have an old foundation. This way."

Down in the sub-basement, where the house dug its fingers into the rock, was the Passman family's proudest possession: a circle of rock fused into glass, about three meters across. A few amorphous lumps of carbon composite stuck out of it. Laia Korvengeld stared at it, not recognizing what it was.

"We don't really have documentary authentication for it," Hektor said. "But we're sure it's the site of an extremely early pressure dome. One of the ones from the First Settlement."

She knelt and put her long-fingered hand on the fused glass. "It was so hard. So hard. No Landing Day parties for them."

"No. They'd only just landed themselves."

"Think of how often they must have lost their air," Laia said. "Choking on their own carbon dioxide. Suffocation connects us. They died just the same way. The oldest ones, the first ones."

She was more mysterious than she had seemed upstairs. Laia was finer-limbed than a First Settler would have been, but Hektor could still imagine her in an early skintite, setting up an enclosed hydroponic garden or skimming across the red-sand surface in a vapor-puffing jumper. If he tried to kiss her, what would she say? She wouldn't allow it, of course, but it still might be interesting to—

She stood and brushed off her knees. "Time for me to go," she said briskly. "My company will be leaving."

Hektor escorted her to the front hall. That was as much as he would get done tonight.

She slapped his chest with her hand. "Enough. Thank you. For showing me a little of how things work."

He bowed. "I will call you."

"Sure." Her attention was already on something in the departing crowd. He watched her walk away from him. That clinging red dress really did suit her figure.

Something distracted him and he let his eyes wander away from her, up the lines of the vault above. Windows and balconies from the upper floors hung overhead. Breyten stood in the uppermost balcony, looking down. From there, the figures on the floor were just foreshortened dots, easy targets. As children, he and Breyten had hidden up there and dropped water balloons on unsuspecting guests. They would drift down slowly, slowly, but no one ever looked up to see the approaching doom.

What was Breyten looking at? Hektor gazed across the thinning crowd and caught just a glimpse of the person Laia had been hurrying to meet. It was Nyasa Tso, who was gathering a thick, regal stole across her shoulders. Then they were gone. And, high above, so was Breyten.

The Feast of Gabriel was as loud as ever, but Hektor, as he shouldered his way through the crowd, thought he sensed something different in the noise. The shading of mood had changed subtly during his two years on Earth, become darker and more refractory. He'd seen it in his work for the Legislature, in the unexpected resistances and angers he had encountered where all should have been simple political accommodation, but somehow it was all clearer here in the street, even though it was concealed beneath the macabre costumes and behaviors of the Feast of Gabriel.

The snaking tunnel passed through a gate and opened out into a glass-topped canyon. Once a channel on the floor of Tithonium Chasma, it had been tented over during the early days of settlement. The great northern cliff of Tithonium was just visible above, cutting a scalloped line against the darkening sky.

Laia was out here somewhere, in the northern passages leading toward Rahab Square. She'd refused to arrange a specific meeting place, but had just said "Find me. I won't hide."

Giant mythic figures were carried on the backs of willing acolytes. One of them, arms outspread, head thrown back in ecstasy, Hektor recognized as the Terran saint, Aya Ngomo. A blue-green glow came from her forehead, the color of the ngomite she had discovered.

Laia wasn't under there. "I'll be Amme," she'd said. "Watch for me."

He'd been looking for some image of Amme herself, but there, sweeping along behind Aya Ngomo, crouched protectively, was the tragic hero Brakner, Amme's lover. A poet had once said that he was every young girl's first love. Amme and Brakner was an old and romantic story, and even somewhat true.

Hektor paused and watched the heavily muscled figure lumber by him. He quickly examined the people beneath the bulging calves to see if he could see Laia. He caught a glimpse of a few floating strands of blond hair, nothing more. Brakner swept around a curve and Hektor followed. They were moving quickly, and he pushed himself into a lope.

Gowned students ran past with unsheathed swords gleaming in the insanely bright overhead lights. The Feast of Gabriel was a security nightmare, as all of Oswald DeCoven's Martian associates had pointed out. Still, the Governor-Resident had insisted on his public appearance, despite growing hostility to his presence. Of course, Hektor reflected, Martians would never have consented to be governed by someone who was afraid to appear in public.

The canyon widened out and disappeared, and Hektor found himself in a vast rotunda. The crystal dome overhead was so high it disappeared. It leaped from bastions of native rock and hung suspended by the higher air pressure inside. The sky was now black, hung with stars, though a light show played on the great northern wall of Tithonium, flaring it with imaginary daylight.

Specks flickered somewhere up in Rahab Square's vaulted expanse. Hektor squinted, trying to make them out. It took him a few moments to recognize flocks of fancy pigeons with multicolored feathers. DeCoven was somewhere around with his fellow bird fanciers.

Hektor wasn't interested in the Governor-Resident's hobby. Brakner was tilting, as his figure was transferred from one group of acolytes to another. He grinned to himself. This was actually kind of fun. He wouldn't have put it past Laia to have put a ringer under Brakner, some old crone with a blond wig. But there she was, hands on the small of her back, curving her shoulders back in a languorous stretch.

Laia grinned when she saw him. "Now, that wasn't all that mysterious, was it? And I bet you've been pouting all day."

"I've been too busy to pout." She was just what he needed, here in the midst of this shouting crowd. She took his arm and they walked together, bouncing in a zig-zag Brownian path.

"Look!" she said. "There he is."

Oswald DeCoven stood in the middle of the swirling crowd. He had garlands of flowers around his neck, given him by some school girls in a staged ceremony. Though the crowd was densely packed, there was a subtle gap around him, as if he secreted some sort of toxin. Huge empty frameworks stood above him. There was no way to tell what they were supposed to be.

DeCoven was a large, fleshy man with oddly firm fat that seemed to give him extra strength. His black hair was slicked to his swollen skull, and his skin had the sheen of fine split leather. Hektor imagined that the skin was slippery, but knew of no one who would testify to that, for all of DeCoven's amorous reputation.

With a groaning sound, a grandstand set up for a rally earlier in the day collapsed into twisted ruin. Hektor yanked Laia out of the way of a sliding row of benches. There were a few shrieks, but no one seemed seriously hurt.

She laughed. "Let's get a better look at DeCoven."

"For God's sake, why?" He pulled her closer. "There are a lot more interesting things—"

"Come on! Watch the birds."

Birds fluttered down and covered the open frameworks above DeCoven. They had been carefully trained, and their variously colored feathers turned the frameworks into yet new ceremonial figures. They were common and easily recognized: the Buddha, the General, and The President, a goggle-eyed figure with a bristling moustache made of fluttering pigeon tails.

DeCoven stood, lonely in the crowd, with a trained pigeon on his finger.

It seemed the only living thing on Mars willing to deal with him. For an instant, Hektor felt sorry for the man. The pigeon cocked its head and examined the Governor-Resident.

"Get your hands *off* me, you bastard!" someone screamed, voice high above the roar of the crowd.

The crowd jerked like some animal jabbed with a pin, almost knocking Hektor from his feet. A flailing melee broke out, swords being swung awkwardly in the confined, crowded space. Blower-powered powder torches sent three-meter colored flames up into the air. A strident steel-drum band frantically pounded out a counterpoint to the rising sound of the riot.

Laia shrieked in delight. "It's the other side of Landing Day, Hektor! No one talks water rights here." Laia's face glowed.

They started to move forward, to DeCoven's left. A group of Martian pigeon fanciers stood there, comparing the plumage of their birds. Then Hektor froze. Nyasa Tso stood on top of the toppled grandstand. She wore a dark Vigil uniform and spoke into a mike on her wrist. Her gaze swept by, and Hektor thought that it paused for an instant on him and Laia.

The noise grew louder. Laia was shouting something at him, but he couldn't hear it. Then he saw. Three of the pigeon fanciers, standing close enough to DeCoven to have been disarmed by the Vigils, grabbed pigeons off the frameworks and ripped the heads off with their bare hands. Blood spurted. And suddenly they held knives in their hands, knives that had been concealed in the birds' spines. Hektor was momentarily awed by the bizarre pointlessness of the technique.

DeCoven jerked back, raising his arms to ward them off, but it was far too late. The assassins ignored the distracting forearms and dove in to slice open his belly. He wailed and fell backward, blood spilling out of his guts in a flood. The assassins turned and fled into the crowd. One of them had long, flowing hair that waved dramatically in the torchlight.

Hektor threw himself forward. He tripped over something and fell, but was still able to hook the ankle of one of the assassins. The pigeon fancier almost shook him off, then fell herself. Hektor rolled and smashed his forehead into the bridge of the woman's nose. He felt a satisfying crunch and heard a scream. Still the woman writhed beneath him, and Hektor started to lose her. An elbow smashed his cheek and his hands loosened.

"Let her go," a calm voice said. "I've got her."

It was Nyasa. With quick precision, she slapped restraining lines around the assassin's wrists and ankles, and had her hauled away. The other two had been caught before they got more than a few yards into the surrounding crowd.

It was a Martian crowd. They didn't scream, stampede, rush forward to gaze greedily on the mangled body that lay on the ground. A ring of silence expanded slowly around them, preceded by a low hum of explanation. Within a few minutes, silence filled the vast rotunda, broken only by the flaring hiss of the powder torches.

Oswald DeCoven lay on his back, dead, the lower half of his body soaked with blood. His pigeon stood on the ground by his head, pecking desultorily at nothing. Vigil troops surrounded his body and bore it away. Nyasa left with them, without a backward glance.

The crowd regained its life. Within five minutes, the roar was as loud as it had been before the assassination. But the mood had changed. It was not mere incomprehension or callousness. DeCoven's death marked the end of the Feast of Gabriel, which normally did not happen until just before dawn. Hektor saw the ceremonial figures begin to topple, to shatter, to go up in flames. They lived only here, in this festival, and the fall of the Governor-Resident somehow marked their fall as well. Prolonging their existence any longer would have been pointless.

There were things to do, decisions to be made, calls . . . but, overcome by the fury of the Feast's end, Hektor instead threw himself on a giant slope-shouldered arhat holding a dragon and, with Laia shrieking at his side, felt chips of plastic fly as it disintegrated under their fists and feet.

"Do Terrans execute people in public?" Laia asked sleepily.

"What?" Naked, Hektor examined the suits hanging in the closet and thought about it. "Earth's a big place. They do things differently, here and there, depending on local traditions."

"But as a matter of Union government *policy*." She uncurled slowly on the bed and stretched her back muscles. "*Their* policy."

"No. Official Terran policy is to regard executions as an unpleasant necessity. They perform them in isolated, easily controlled locations. Dramatic spots, usually. Mountain tops, old fortresses, places like that. No photographs, but artists are permitted to paint and sculpt overwrought versions, for families, for public monuments. You know how they do things."

"Ah." She turned over on her back and bent one of her knees up. The faint hint of a bruise marred the clear white skin just at the swell of the thigh, where his hip had pounded her. Her long red-gold hair poured over the end of the bed toward the floor. She wore the dangly earrings Hektor had bought from a silversmith in Argyre. "Why didn't they do that this time?'"

She was always challenging him, somewhere underneath her languid-seeming speech. She had been doing it since the Feast of Gabriel, three months before. He thought she would always carry something of the excitement of that night with her, like the sharp scent of an underground fire on the clothing of those caught by it.

He'd almost lost her that night. Laia had kissed him after the destruction of the arhat, sending a stab of heat down through his toes. But instead of proceeding as the sexual situation demanded, he paused to make political arrangements with colleagues, to discuss the consequences of DeCoven's unexpected death, to make contingency plans . . . and felt her cooling beside him, neglected and forgotten.

He'd taken her through the almost-deserted streets, feeling the city's growing hangover of festival and political excess, and up one of the big elevators to the north rim of Tithonium, half-supporting her resentfully sleepy form, a child kept too long from bed, and out through the pavilion to the surface to watch the dawn. They'd put on their skintites under their indoor clothes, like forgetful tourists, ignorant of the fashion demanded by the surface.

The footlit chasm-side trail had twisted through the night rocks, but she had pulled him off it, toward the invisible six-kilometer drop to the canyon bottom. He felt her quicken at the presence of the invisible danger, though he couldn't feel her body's heat, not through two sets of bilayer insulation. Under his hands she had been a vivid, vibrating statue.

"Because it's a *Martian* execution, Laia. I've told you that." He knew he sounded impatient.

She smiled, keeping her eyes closed and her head back. "You have."

Why the hell had he brought so many suits? They had only spent three days here in this resort, Laia's choice. He looked up at the sand-blast-cut rock walls of their room. Some resort. The Tombs of the Sun fit into the side of a ravine on the volcano Ascraeus Mons, carved right out of the rock, and had once been . . . what? A monastery, a prison, a place to store toxic wastes. He'd never gotten it clear. The rock roof had been torn away and replaced by a clear tensile dome. The stars peeked in and, every once in a while, one of the moons would amble by. But it was near the Justice of Tharsis's Judgment Chamber, and thus convenient to his duty. He found out later that the place had a three-month waiting list. How had Laia been able to make a reservation?

"Martens was turned over to us by the Division of Internal Security." Why was he telling her this again? "We could have done anything we wanted. Turned him loose, rewarded him with a pension. Fined him five rubles. Whatever we wanted." He remembered the desperately fleeing figure of the lead assassin. He couldn't have picked him out of a witnessing if his life depended on it. All he remembered of Martens was the flowing hair, and the fact that he hadn't yet dropped the bloody pigeon head with the blade sticking out of the tiny skull's base. He'd been caught red-handed, in the most ancient sense.

"Mm hmm." She worried at a forefinger with her teeth, closing her lips around it. "He's not the one you caught, though."

"No. I tackled an accomplice. They're going to lock her in a cell on Phobos and let null-g dissolve her bones. She might live a century or more up there." Better to be beheaded, Hektor thought. Better immediate death than becoming one of those swollen, almost-spherical state prisoners, exiled forever from any planet's surface. He wondered if Martens agreed.

"The execution will only take a few hours," Hektor said. "I'll be back right after."

"I don't want to wait that long." Her hands ran slowly up the muscles of his thigh. She spread fingers over his hips, the nail of her middle finger scratching through his pubic hair. She still hadn't opened her eyes.

"Laia . . . I can't. . . ."

"Doesn't look that way."

They'd felt each other's bodies through the skin-hugging suits, a sweet, frustrating game he remembered from his youth. Below were the glowing lines and dots of the settlements down inside Tithonium. They stretched up and down the opposite cliff face and writhed across the tortured surface of the canyon bottom. In the center, directly below them, was the glowing jewel that was the rotunda where Oswald DeCoven had met his death.

Light grew to the east, down the canyon, where their cliff and the looming one opposite met in the distance. A veil drew across the stars, the rocks began to define themselves.

"Here, here." Laia drew him down to the hard dusty ground. They lay right at the sharp edge of the cliff, teasing the six-kilometer drop to the canyon bottom. Hektor's back stiffened, and she ran her hand down it, feeling the vertebrae through his clothes. The opposite side of Tithonium loomed in the growing light, ten kilometers away.

She pulled off his jacket. Despite the fact that all his protection was provided by his skintite, it left him feeling undefended, "Why—?"

"Shh." She wiggled out of her clothes. She was a dark-carved statue, the suit clinging to every curve, only interrupted by the air supply at her throat and upper back, and the waste recirculator at her crotch and hips. Physiological systems hanging out in the open like that made her look more naked than naked, all her functions completely exposed.

In a few minutes the sky glowed dusty pink all around, and the quick Martian dawn was over.

She'd connected them, through an airtight insulating link. Their real skins touched, just in that one spot, while the rest of them was insulated from each other.

"It's like a rescue tunnel." She giggled sleepily. "Rescue me, Hektor. Rescue me."

It had been more than he could stand. The cold, sharp-edged rocks loomed around him, and Tithonium yawned hungrily right at his shoulder, and they were making love in the dust.

He had rescued her.

But now . . . "I *have* to go. It's my job."

She sighed and turned over. "You know I have to leave. I'll be gone when you get back." It wasn't a threat, just a statement of already-agreed-upon fact, but still it chilled him.

He gave her one backward glance as he ran out. Her hip curved above the sheets, more gentle and beautiful than any other sight on Mars.

"Barely in time." Colonel Trep ran quickly down the hall, as if leading recruits in exercise.

"Unavoidably detained," Hektor puffed, as he kept pace alongside. "Couldn't be helped."

"Everything can be helped. Well, maybe we'll make it after all. Pick it up, Hektor." Trep grinned to himself. The white-haired colonel was an old friend of the Passman family and a prominent actor in Fossic Party politics. He wore a black-dress uniform almost devoid of insignia. Even the marks of his rank were barely noticeable. He was a witness today, not an actor.

Hektor saw no advantage in replying further, particularly as Trep was exaggerating his lateness, and just concentrated on keeping up. The hallway was long and straight, carved through the compressed volcanic ejecta covering the shallow-sloping cone of Ascraeus Mons. There was no reason for it to be so far from the vehicle park to the Judgment Chamber, Hektor thought irritably. It was just pointless processional, a sign that justice was not as easily accessible as it sometimes appeared.

"Here we are," Trep said. "They haven't started yet."

The Judgment Chamber was huge, perhaps thirty meters high and at least a hundred long, carved out of volcanic rock. All of the interior partitions that normally divided it into separate court and hearing rooms had been removed, leaving the giant, gold-glowing ovoid unencumbered, except for the high screen that blocked the front. It was packed full of people.

"There it is," Trep grunted. "They saved us a spot."

Just at the point where the floor of the chamber curved up too steeply for anyone to stand on it any more was a small platform. It was crowded with high-ranking politicos from both parties. Trep and Hektor pushed through the crowd.

There was a rustle and an indrawn breath from below, and the silence became absolute. A solemn, short figure proceeded up the open aisle. It was the Justice of Tharsis, Ur Kastañega. His arms were tightly covered and elaborately knotted in ceremonial white, and in them he held the wide-bladed, razor-edged ax. The great tool, with its swooping silver-embossed handle and its multilayered blade, was several centuries old, its origins now forgotten. It might even have been brought from Earth, though Martian pieties required that this possibility not even be considered.

Behind the solemn justice came Brian Martens, trying to hold his head up proudly despite his obvious terror. Two guards walked just behind him, ready to seize him should he struggle or collapse. Like everyone else in the vast chamber, Hektor leaned forward just slightly to examine the man about to die, even though, in theory, even a public death was supposed to be private. Martens was a big man, lean, even handsome, with the long hair Hektor remembered now held back by glittering clips. In general, Martens had overdressed for the occasion, with long flowing sleeves and high boots, giving himself a slightly breezy manner, as if he didn't take being sentenced to death seriously.

That he had been was a tribute to the new Governor-Resident, Michaela Techadomrongsin, once DeCoven's almost-invisible assistant. Once the culprits were in Union hands, Techadomrongsin had, after consultation with Passman and other highly ranked Martians, turned them over to purely Martian justice. It was an act of superb self-confidence. Planned protests over Terran high-handedness were canceled in stunned dismay. And Martian justice, showing its trustworthiness, had exacted a much harsher penalty than the Terrans would have dared, as Techadomrongsin had no doubt anticipated.

Tharsis was not the actual executioner, but as the representative of Justice in this part of Mars, he had to indicate his responsibility—complicity, some would have said—in the necessary death. He was a hunched-over old man with wispy white hair. The harsh blade seemed to have more life than he did.

The Justice of Tharsis climbed a set of stone stairs and passed behind the screen. Martens paused at the foot of the stairs, the lowest point in the bowl of the floor, and looked at the silent mob that curved up around him.

Standing near him, half-concealed from Hektor's view, was a thin, pale-haired man. Hektor thought that, even at this distance, he could see the high cheekbones, the skin stretched tightly over them, as if they were ready to burst through. Breyten, whom he had not seen since the Landing Day party. He had evaporated from family councils, as he had done before. Hektor turned, thinking of pointing Breyten out to Trep, but Trep's attention was elsewhere. Not on the tongue-tied Martens, but on the crowd, which he searched with scorch-eyed intentness.

Martens closed his mouth, shaking his head slightly, as if in argument with himself. Silence would be his only message to the tensely awaiting crowd. Hektor wasn't surprised. DeCoven's death had communicated all Martens wanted to say. Anything else would be a pedantic footnote. Martens climbed slowly up the stairs after Tharsis. His back vanished behind the screen. His two guards followed. One of them would be the actual executioner, chosen by the flip of an ancient coin, this one acknowledged to have been brought from Earth.

Hektor knew what to expect, but it still startled him. As if a mysterious underground sun had sprung above an invisible horizon, the shadows of the participants in the drama appeared, bulking and sharp-edged, on the rear wall of the chamber.

The hunched-over Justice of Tharsis had been transformed into a looming giant, who handed the ax to the executioner with a bland, uninflected gesture, all the more ominous for its lack of obvious theater. The shivering shadow of Martens was bent over the block. He moaned, a sound shockingly loud in the chamber's clear acoustics.

It was all over in an instant, the swing, the sickening thunk of the blade sliding between the cervical vertebrae into the solid block, the tumbling away into invisibility of the suddenly detached head.

The crowd stood silent for a moment longer, acknowledging *its* complicity, then dispersed, spilling through the wide doorway, its job of witnessing finished. Hektor gazed over them, seeing if he could recognize any of Trep's security people, the Vigils, who had no doubt been there, helping Trep search for whoever it was he wanted to find.

Hektor took a guess. "Did you see him?"

"Your brother? Of course. He was standing close enough to Martens to touch him. You're a boiling-blood bunch, you Passmans, know that, Hektor?"

Hektor was not to be distracted. "You weren't looking for Breyten, or you'd have stopped searching when you found him. You were hoping Rudolf Hounslow was there."

"And why would I expect such a thing?" Trep was sardonic.

"I didn't say you expected it. I said you were hoping, just as my father hoped he'd show up at his Landing Day party. But you didn't see him."

Trep gave in. "No. I didn't see him."

"Any reason why he should come at all?"

"To see it. Not through a sense of personal responsibility, but just to connect himself to it. I'll bet he was here. You don't know him like I do."

"And how do you know him?" Trep looked hesitant. Hektor grinned. "Come on, Gustavus, you want to tell me, or you wouldn't have allowed yourself to talk about it at all." Trep still sometimes treated him as Lon Passman's son, rather than as a politician in his own right, albeit a minor one. This usually annoyed Hektor, but there were times when he could turn it to his advantage. There were stories Trep would tell a member of the Passman family that he would never whisper to an ambitious Fossic Party Legislator.

After a moment's thought, Trep jerked his head, gesturing them out of the main flow of traffic. They stepped into a windowed alcove. The view looked out into a deep, smooth-surfaced gully that had been cut by flowing lava at some time in the distant past.

"I knew Hounslow at school," Trep said.

"Hounslow went to St. Hilarion?" Hektor asked, startled. It was a prominent school, located in the crater Milankovic, significantly near the blast crater where, in 2253, a Technic ship had destroyed a Union base during the Seven Planets War, the most visible marker of that conflict left on Mars.

"He did, and not a bad student, either. He was a few years younger than me, so I didn't see him much. Save for discipline, of course. Hounslow needed a lot of discipline, mostly because he liked to impose his own on the younger students."

"A bully?"

Trep thought about that one, pulling at his lower lip. "Nothing so simple. Just smacking smaller children around is an easy practice to break, usually by making the bully responsible for the smaller kids' safety. Or by tearing his ear. But that was just the problem. Hounslow kept organizing the younger ones, before they were really ready for it. Just for the purpose of causing riots, as far as anyone could see. Disruptive of discipline. *Organized* discipline. And why else do we go to school?"

The students of St. Hilarion, boys and girls alike, were famous for their barrackslike organization. In later years they tended to become prominent military officers. Like Colonel Gustavus Trep.

"Was he expelled?" Hektor asked.

"He was, but not just for that. He was an *articulate* son of a bitch, even then. He always had some historical backing for his actions, if you can believe that. Ancient Spartans, medieval Russian thugs, all sorts of people. Nice intellectual underpinnings, and they loved that at Hilarion. Hell, Hounslow even knew who St. Hilarion was, and I never did get that too straight." Trep looked bleakly wrathful, as if the saint's identity had been kept from him on purpose.

"What did Hounslow do?" Hektor persisted.

"He mounted an expedition. Five of the younger ones went with him, three girls, two boys, all about twelve years old. You know kids that age, they'll do anything, particularly the girls. Wild things. They were on a class trip to Olympus Mons. He took them off from the main group—to climb the damn thing. They started at about fifteen kilometers in altitude. That leaves twelve kilometers to climb. Plus, I think Hounslow's real goal was *inside* the caldera. God knows what it was, now. Acherusian remains, maybe. He always had a lot of theories about that."

"He climbed Olympus to perform amateur archeology?"

Trep bared his teeth. "You know, three of them actually made it. Hounslow and two of the girls. The others fell off along the way. Gave up their air, exhaled. One of them apparently crawled so far under a rock that we never found her body. Didn't want to leave evidence for the pursuers. The others were picked up . . . one of them dead, the other barely alive. Lost a lot of external tissue damage, that one. Frostbite, desiccation, oxygen loss. A little brain damage too. So they threw Hounslow the hell out. No parents, he was a state case. But you know, they still tell the story of that climb at that school. Kind of dangerous, the school administration bans it, which just makes it that much more fun, right?"

"Right," Hektor said, and thought of Breyten. That was exactly his thing, climbing a pointless volcano to die at the top. The thought chilled him.

Trep stood, anecdote over. "So I know some little about Rudolf Hounslow. He was there today, you have my word on that. Somewhere in that cloud of grim witnesses, he watched his servant lose his head. And what did that head roll for? Slicing up a mostly ceremonial Governor due to be rotated to moldy Earth in a few months anyway? Makes no sense, but Hounslow always did do things his own way."

"Maybe he was disguised as Justice Kastañega," Hektor said. "Just to supervise his minion's removal at close range."

Trep glowered. "You joke, boy. You'll find him breathing cold down your neck soon enough, never fear."

"Ah, relax, Gustavus," Hektor said, slapping Trep's shoulder. "I know this stuff is getting serious. I'll ask around, see if I can find anything out."

"Right. When you find Hounslow, give him my address, so he can come over."

"Don't turn down any potential help, Colonel," Hektor said, with a contrived air of offense. "You never know where a lead's going to break."

"You're right, of course," Trep said, unembarrassed. "Keep in touch, Hektor."

"I shall."

It would have to be here, Hektor thought, as he contemplated the cliffs above him, and the ledge thrusting out some hundred meters up. Breyten would never just take a hotel room, never just take the magtrack from Valles Marineris to Ascraeus, never just live at ease.

Night was falling over the rock-strewn plains to the west. Starting overhead, a huge V of red-glowing clouds drifted out toward the dusty horizon, an arrow pointing right at him, identifying him for viewers in orbit. The clouds were roiled and clenched, caused by the pressure-reducing climb of water-containing wind as it slid over the great bulk of Ascraeus.

The cliff was shattered lava columns, which left chimneys. He slid his way up easily, grabbing onto flutes and strangely twisted plates, traces of long-ago liquid flows, when Mars had been alive.

There was no Breyten Passman anywhere at Ascraeus, but there was a Pierre Sanserif, Breyten's childhood game name, registered as a camper on the volcanic shield itself.

Hektor bounced easily up the last few meters and came out on the ledge. A tesselated pressure dome rested there, glowing with its own internal light. The sky was black, the land around completely invisible, save for the pinpoints of vehicles and dwelling places. Hektor clicked up the intensity of his earphones and listened to the rock-eroding hiss of the eternal wind.

Breyten sat, arms around his knees, staring off to the west. He glanced up at Hektor. "You know, I think I can just see the top of Olympus from here."

"You can't either. It's too far."

"It *was* too far. It's moved."

"Nothing moves on Mars. It's a dead planet." Grunting, he sat down next to Breyten. When Breyten had been six, they had come to the top of Ascraeus Mons with their mother and father. Breyten had insisted to the point of red-faced rage that he could see the top of Olympus Mons from where they stood, despite the fact that it was far over the horizon. Their mother had carried him back inside, kicking and screaming.

"Human beings move," Breyten said softly. "That's why we came here to Mars. So that something would happen here."

"A lot's happening. Like my brother disappearing for three months, then reappearing, unannounced, at an execution."

Breyten shrugged. "I was just witnessing a legal procedure."

Hektor stared at him for a long moment. This was going to be harder than he had hoped. "I came here with Laia, Breyten."

"I know."

"All right. You know. When I met her, I asked her what she was to you. A friend, she said. Just someone she knew. If she—"

"She wasn't lying." A smile jerked across Breyten's face. "Not at all."

"All right. She came there with Nyasa Tso. She's an officer under Trep."

"I know her." Breyten spoke carefully.

"But, Laia. She's being such a mystery, and I want to know—"

"There's not much to know," Breyten said, enjoying his brother's discomfiture. "She was a student at Flaurgergues. I don't know what she studied. It's not important. There's nothing much unusual about her. I only met her recently, through a friend. Frankly, I'm surprised you're so interested in her."

Hektor wondered at the contempt in his voice, a strong emotion that contradicted his words. "So, her friend, Nyasa—"

"Hektor," Breyten said. "Do you want some tea?"

"I—yes. That's why I came to see you. No one else knows how to make it right. It's been years." It was Breyten's calming ritual. It would help him talk.

Breyten rolled and stood. "Come on in."

They crawled through the air lock into the spare interior of the tent: a sleeping pad, a travel case, an air plant, a water container, a heating element. It looked, Hektor realized, very much like Breyten's room at home, which was almost devoid of possessions. In his adolescence, Breyten had often cooked over a heater in his room, as if he was just temporarily passing through the Passman house on a journey to somewhere else. Those rare occasions when Breyten had invited his older brother to join him in a meal seemed to Hektor like an honor, despite the fact that the food was almost inedible, even to a Martian palate.

"Colonel Trep was looking for Rudolf Hounslow," Hektor said, as Breyten set up the tea apparatus over the heater: a long silver pipe, expeller, and filter.

"Hounslow wasn't there."

"How do you know that?"

"Father hasn't told you?"

"Told me what?" It wasn't unusual that Breyten had information from Lon that Hektor didn't, but it still hurt.

"Let me see if I can explain."

The tea maker hissed and bubbled, and the smell of the tea suffused the thin, dry air of the tent. Breyten had turned the interior light down to almost nothing, so that the darkness outside seeped in. His face was lit dimly from underneath.

The dark speck of Deimos hung in the sky almost directly overhead, while Phobos crept up from the west toward it, moving almost visibly as it forged its way against the rotation of Mars.

"Look at this," Breyten said, and tossed Hektor a small object. He caught it, examined it. It was a small silver tube with a kink in it. Hektor looked questioning. "An air valve from an old skintite. I found it just inside the western edge of the Noctis Labyrinthus. We never really made it that far when we were kids, though Father took us near there, sometimes. He liked that area, remember? There was a rock fall, an overhang . . . and what looked like some old remains of a camp. Shreds of insulation. Someone had scratched up the wall. Nothing recognizable, no words or anything. Claw marks, almost. There was a trace of crawler tread near the edge of the fall. It's sheltered there, the wind doesn't blow. I dug around and found that."

Hektor handed the valve back to him. "You should contact Historical Services. They love things like that. You know how bad the records are. They need all the help they can get."

Breyten turned away to pour tea. "They don't care about these things, not really. They'll just put it in a drawer and forget about it. Historical Services is funded from Earth, did you know that?"

"By the Union of States and Nationalities." The phrase abraded his throat as he said it, because Breyten wouldn't pay attention to it. Hektor was hearing that word, "Terran," more and more spoken as an epithet. And more and more inaccurately. Soon he would be hearing that Mars had no atmosphere because the Terrans had stolen it.

"Well, whatever. They don't care about our history. It's just a side issue with them." He carefully rolled the valve up in a cloth and stowed it back in his case. "There might be other remains there, under the rock fall. I'll have to look. I'm the only one who knows where it is."

Breyten had always had these secret discoveries out in the tangled grabens of the Labyrinth: mysterious ruins of the millions-of-years-gone Acherusians, evidence of indigenous Martian life, hints of uncitied nomads who roamed the plains, extracting water from rock and growing plants on their backs, unknown to the immobile dwellers in canyons and volcanoes. An odd crack in a rock was enough to set him off.

"You'll have to show me some time," Hektor said.

"Maybe I will."

Breyten handed him a cup and Hektor took a sip of the harsh and bitter tea. He nodded his approval. Martian tea was a particular point of pride to Breyten, since no one from anywhere else in the Solar System could stand the stuff.

"Hey," Hektor said, examining the rough-textured stoneware cup. "This is mine!"

Breyten smiled shyly. "Yes, it is. You made them in school, remember? We used them for a year or so, then you said that they were bad and childish, that you were embarrassed to use them any more. You had other things to think about, other interests. So you put them away to be thrown out. I rescued them. They're the ones I use."

Hektor held it up in what little light there was. "Huh. Not bad, not bad at all. Not like I remember them." It had been hard, hard work making them, he now remembered. Their instructor had been precise and demanding. Making a good form of something was an essential Martian tradition: everyone, some time in their lives, should make a precious, important object. These cups had been Hektor's almost self-mocking attempt. The green glaze gleamed at him from the cracks in the surface. He could no longer remember how he had managed that effect.

"Do you want them back?" The concern was clear in Breyten's voice.

"No, no. They go the best with your tea. I can't make it, not the way you can. They don't make any sense unless they're used right."

So they sat and drank Breyten's tea out of Hektor's cups, and Hektor wondered how he would be able to say anything important, about Laia, about anything.

"You wanted to know about Hounslow," Breyten said.

"You said Trep wouldn't be able to find him. Trep, incidentally, told me a story, about Houslow's climb up Olympus Mons." He repeated it.

Breyten frowned. "That's not the way I heard it. I have a friend who attended St. Hilarion. They tell it a little differently there, in barracks after lights-out."

"What do they tell?"

"First off, they say that Hounslow actually started at the base of Olympus. And that he carried the school banner as he did it."

"They think he carried the school *banner* twenty-seven kilometers up the slope of Olympus? How did he get over the Scarp?" The base of Olympus was a sheer cliff.

Breyten shrugged. "Maybe he started from the top of the Scarp, then. Anyway, they climbed, he and the others. As each kid got tired, he gave his air to Hounslow, to let him keep climbing."

That last, Hektor had to admit, was not impossible. Military brats tended to be fanatical, willing to do anything for the team, to get their name on the Honor Wall. But it hadn't happened. Not that way. Even Breyten must know that.

"Did your friend ever wonder why Hounslow's name does not appear on the Honor Wall?"

"Erased," Breyten said promptly. "At some politician's order, later, when Hounslow was disgraced."

"Oh, God," Hektor groaned. "This is all getting worse than I expected." Breyten had avoided telling him who the friend with the story was. Digging for it would clam Breyten right up, Hektor knew. But he'd figure it out. And then Breyten's reluctance to reveal the name would illuminate something. Hektor hoped.

"Dad knows Hounslow, you know."

"Personally?" Hektor asked, startled.

"How else does Dad know anything? Of course, personally. I don't know how they met, but they have. That's why he expected him at the Landing Day party. It wasn't just absurd optimism. You know Dad never feels that."

"I know. Still, he managed to distract me. I thought it was just . . . I don't know, a whim, something."

"A whim." Breyten looked startled.

"Look," Hektor said, slightly irritated. "I've know him for longer than you have, but that doesn't mean I understand him any better."

"No, no." Breyten bit his lower lip. "I'm not supposed to tell you this, Hektor, but . . . he's sending me in. His private representative. To the Olympus Clubs."

"What?" Hektor had expected almost anything, but not this. His brother as some sort of private secret agent? What was his father thinking?

"It's just a point-of-contact kind of thing," Breyten said in a rush. "He wants to communicate with Hounslow."

"You're going to join the Olympus Clubs. The ones that murdered Oswald DeCoven. Do you have any idea what that means, Breyten?"

"What, you think I haven't thought about it? Dad and I have discussed it for months. DeCoven's death has an effect, sure, but we've got to do it. The Terrans aren't interested, Hektor. They should be, but they aren't. They've left this a Martian problem. Our problem. We've got to solve it."

Hektor stared at his brother in wonder. "And you're going to solve it by playing spy? Like peeking through the gun slits at the party in the front hall?" He and Breyten had spent hours doing that, as boys.

"I'm not playing, Hektor. Don't you understand? The only irresponsible thing I'm doing it telling you. Unprofessional. Should I not have done it? Can't I trust you to take me seriously, to understand? I need defense to my rear. You." He held Hektor's upper arms desperately.

"Okay, okay." Trep hadn't been surprised at Breyten's presence at the execution. And Nyasa Tso was Colonel Trep's subordinate. Was she Breyten's control? "Let me know what I can do."

Breyten smiled at his older brother. "Thank you. You're the only one I can trust with this."

Breyten was lying. Not directly, not with words, but Hektor knew that there was something being concealed, even from Lon Passman. Their father thought he was assigning Breyten to a difficult, unpleasant task, a great piece of responsibility for his favored son. Lon didn't seem to realize that he was giving Breyten just what he wanted: a reason to join Rudolf Hounslow's movement. Breyten was disguising desire as duty.

"More tea, please," Hektor said, and watched as Breyten poured. They would drink tea together. For now, he would have to be satisfied with that.

His prayers finished, Hektor jumped up from his knees. Trep crossed himself, then got up more sedately. Memorial markers glowed in the sepulchral darkness. He peered around. "Not a popular spot, is it? A damn shame. Some things shouldn't be forgotten. It's the twenty-fourth of November, Earth date. Seventy-sixth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Juno, ending the Seven Planets War. As little as ten years ago it was a major holiday, a celebration of victory. Lon always brought you boys here."

Hektor remembered coming to the memorials, shuffling through as part of an endless, silent line. Now he and Trep were alone. "I remember."

"It wasn't any kind of a victory. The Technics succeeded in their objectives. They broke away from Earth. Bah. Doesn't make sense to celebrate, doesn't make sense to ignore it either. A lot of brave men and women died in that war. In an evil cause, they say now, the preservation of Terran hegemony." He nodded around them. "But it doesn't do to forget them like that. Doesn't do at all."

The memorial was in the shape of wind-eroded rock ridges, yardangs. The ceiling mimicked their curves, and Hektor knew that the memorial was duplicated up on the actual windswept surface, a few hundred meters up. Each yardang was carved with names, Martians killed in the war, and the far wall was covered with a giant Solar System diagram, marking the places deaths had occurred.

"So what's going on here?" Trep was plaintive. "Is Hounslow the way it is after all? You'd think we would value bravery, no matter what the cause. Hell, I don't even think Breyten is here. It was always his place."

Things had cooled down in the months since Brian Martens's execution, as if DeCoven's death, followed by his, had burned off some amount of psychic energy. Was that deliberate? Hektor wouldn't put it past the Higokuru faction at court to provide a political scapegoat to be killed annually at the Feast of Gabriel: some superannuated political hack who, avoiding rusticated retirement, would achieve his apotheosis on Mars, thus keeping the peace. Hounslow would tire of that, Hektor thought. He was probably already tired of it. Hektor would have to ask Breyten what he thought. If he could ever find him.

Seemed like Breyten was a ticklish subject all around. "If that were true," Hektor said to Trep, "we'd have the Technic war memorial right next door. Weren't they brave, too?"

"We—" Trep paused. "There are always a million arguments, Hektor. Most of them are just to hide what we really think."

"I suppose. There must be a convincing one somewhere."

"If there is, I haven't heard it."

There was the sound of a quick, firm step in the half-darkness, and a tall dark woman appeared at the far end of the yardang. She wore a long mourning cloak. She was not in uniform, so she and Trep did not salute.

"Do you two know each other?" Colonel Trep said. "Hektor Passman, Nyasa Tso."

Hektor bowed easily. "We've been introduced." He'd been certain that Trep would bring his suite with him to the memorial. That was one of the reasons he had come. He'd wanted to see her again. He didn't have a good argument as to why.

"Indeed." Then she smiled, crinkles running from the corners of her eyes and mouth, showing that smiles were more common on her face than he would have thought. "We also met at DeCoven's assassination, you remember, Colonel."

It may have been good to see him again, but she didn't sound much pleased by the idea. She turned her head away, so that he was looking at the line of her strong jaw.

Trep gazed at the two of them quizzically. "Well, if you can keep Hektor entertained for a moment, Ms. Tso—and that's not as easy as it looks—I'll round up the rest of the troops and we can head out."

"Yes, sir." Trep stalked off into the underground yardangs.

"Maneuvers of some sort?" Hektor said. Trep took the Vigils through all sorts of evolutions, in anticipation of civil war.

"We have our business." Her voice was as unresponsive as a computer demanding a password.

All right. Hektor was used to challenges. "Your family's memorials are here, aren't they?"

She flicked a look at him. *Where are your ancestors buried?* was an old and honorable Martian conversational gambit. "My great-grandmother died in the Asteroid Belt during the war. And my grandfather's uncle vanished somewhere off Saturn . . . you know, I think the location is still classified, in case we go to war with the Technics."

"A Passman died at Saturn also, during the Titanean expedition."

"Karla Passman commanded my uncle's force," Nyasa said. "I've read his letters. He didn't like her."

"No one did. I've read *hers*." Actually, he hadn't, though Breyten had, and given Hektor enough information to fake it, if necessary. "She was as precise and demanding as they come. I think she's my father's favorite ancestor."

"It must not have been easy, growing up with Lon Passman as a father," she said. "Fortunately, the Tsos are notoriously lax."

He looked at her, the square-set shoulders, the precisely draped cloak, the large, long hands with their banded rings, the serenely sardonic expression on her face, and doubted that statement.

"You disagree?" Nyasa asked, amused by the judgment on his face. "Some of us are even innkeepers—my uncle runs a hotel on Ascraeus. The Tombs of the Sun, it's called. You know it?"

"I know it," he said shortly. Here, unbidden, was an explanation of how Laia had been able to find a room for them at the Tombs without waiting. It had been through her good friend, Nyasa Tso. And what, then, did Nyasa know? Was she taunting him?

She was. She wore dangly earrings in her well-developed ears. He recognized them. They were the ones he had bought in Argyre for Laia, the ones she had, somehow, lost a few weeks later. Her apology had been tearful.

Nyasa had counted on meeting him here, too. That was why she had worn them, of all the earrings she owned, to give him a sign. There was something she wanted to say to him—something she *needed* to say to him, because it was clear that the sight of him did not please her.

His first impulse was to make it tough on her, to be lazily hostile and evasive, to make her struggle. But it was clearly hard enough for her to begin with. She'd tightened her lips into two hard lines and stared off at a meaningless, dead-name-inscribed yardang.

The thought of Laia brought Breyten with it. They had both denied any emotional connection, but Hektor still didn't believe it. He wasn't sure if it was directly sexual, but he knew it was there. He thought of Breyten the last time he'd seen him, sitting in that tent on Ascraeus:

"I think my brother Breyten is getting himself into a good deal of trouble," Hektor said softly.

"I haven't seen him in a long time," she said. He sensed that he'd startled her by bringing Breyten up, though she hadn't even blinked.

Through unspoken accord, they found themselves walking the sinuous path between the yardangs.

"Neither have I," Hektor said.

She glanced at him. "Are you and your brother close?"

"Close? I'm not sure I'd use that word. But, everything one of us does affects the other. Can't always predict what the result will be, but neither of us can avoid it."

They walked through the long, corkscrewing tunnel out of the memorial and out into Pyramid Square. The ponderous bulk of Protector's Gate, with its countless niches holding busts of deceased worthies, cut the space in half, raising blocky towers toward the tesselated transparent roof far overhead.

Pyramid Square was the great public meeting place of this part of Tithonium, and swirled with a busy, multicolored crowd. Sellers and buyers congregated under the dark arches of the Gate. In the vast, weatherless interior of Mars, Pyramid Square served as the place of interchange, debate, managed conflict. Most of the people of central Tithonium took at least one turn around the Square each day. Some almost never left. A pit lined with curving benches held local politicians, petitioners, debaters of the issues of the day. It was a constant excited gabble. Hektor saw colleagues moving around, talking with constituents, listening for the first rumble of avalanching issues, and, for an instant, longed to be with them, doing his job. He'd have to come back later.

"Do you find it odd that no one worries about Rudolf Hounslow any more?" Hektor asked.

"Hounslow." She said the name as if she was scraping it off her tongue. "If you want, we can go over to the Gate, buy some books and cubes about his life and works. I can't believe it. He's become some kind of cult figure, an elvis, as if he doesn't really exist. They'll be building effigies of him for the Feast of Gabriel next."

She was about to say something more, when Hektor found himself surrounded by petitioners who wanted to argue about an obsolete airlock that had been closed off near their dwellings, and wanted to know when it would be functioning again. It was his mistake, of course, to come into Pyramid Square with the intention of doing anything but politicking.

Nyasa drifted off. He felt a moment of irritation. If no one worried about airlocks, then Hounslow indeed wouldn't matter, but that wasn't the solution to the problem.

He promised the petitioners an open meeting, brushed off a fellow Legislator without even finding out what issue she wanted to discuss, and hurried after Nyasa. She walked ahead, from spot of sun to spot of sun, like a child playing a game, as the tesselated glass overhead darkened and made itself transparent again. Now that he'd seen clouds, he knew the effect it was mimicking.

"Bloody revolt, Ms. Tso," he said in her ear. "For or against?"

She stopped and looked him full in the face. She didn't *want* to like him, he saw. "Against, Mr. Passman."

"Good. We're on the same side, then."

"And what side is that?"

He took a leap. "Mars as part of the Union, but culturally independent. Martian internal security handled, as much as possible, by the Vigil. Hounslow discredited, the Olympus Clubs disbanded, and you stop treating me as if I was the man who murdered your parents."

She did a slight double-take at that last. "All right. So what?"

"So I need a point of contact inside the Vigil. Because the Vigil isn't secure, is it?" He raised a hand. "You don't have to say anything, finger colleagues you consider unreliable, nothing like that. But I need to know what's going on. And you know I can't use Colonel Trep for that purpose." Though he half-suspected that Trep had put him and Nyasa together precisely so that Trep could be neatly out of the loop.

"We really can't act, you know. As far as anyone can prove, or at least feels like proving, Rudolf Hounslow has done absolutely nothing that can justify action against him."

"He will, Nyasa. You know he will."

"These are some of the old tunnels," Laia said. "Twenty-second century. Monastic type. Everything looked like a monastery back then."

"I'm surprised they still maintain them," Hektor said.

They walked down a long, straight tunnel cut out of native rock. A maintenance lamp glowed every five meters or so, giving just enough light to avoid the occasional bit of rubble. They were under the south wall of Ius Chasma, one of the oldest areas of Martian settlement. The period held no interest to modern Martians, or Terran tourists, and was almost abandoned.

"Who says they do?" They turned a corner, and the tunnel was blocked by an airlock marked with the standard double red chevron that meant *Danger Of Explosive Decompression*. It was clearly much later in date than the tunnel.

"Laia," Hektor said. "You didn't tell me we'd need skintites."

"That's because we don't." She thumbed the lock and it opened.

A Martian could no more go through such an airlock unprotected than he could reach to pick up a white-hot bar of metal with his bare hand. It was an ingrained childhood reflex. Hektor stood frozen.

She looked over her shoulder at him. "Coming, darling?" Her swirling hair seemed to return more light than the maintenance lights gave it.

"But, Laia—"

"There's breathable air. This is just a redundant safety precaution. See the indicator?"

She reached out her hand. He took it and let himself get pulled into the airlock. A cycle, a click—a moment of effort to unlock his throat, and Hektor took a slow breath. Air. That was good. There was air. Musty and poorly recirculated, but breathable. He hadn't even brought a carbon-dioxide meter to clip to his earlobe. It didn't take surface pressure to suffocate, damn it.

"Come on, come on." There weren't any maintenance lights here, but there was light ahead. The tunnel curved, then opened out into a vast space. Sunlight came from translucent window panels at the apexes of domes, to shine on a floor covered with toppled rubble, in all sizes from pebbles to multi-ton chunks.

"Look," Laia said. "Isn't it great?" She gestured around. Something glinted at the top of a curved niche, bits of pure color.

"You know we're legally on the surface here," Hektor said.

"You've been legislating too long. Never mind legally. Do you see the sky? Here, look, this slab is loose. Help me pull. Come on!" Laia slid her fingers under the edge of a peeling rock slab and yanked. All her effort went into it, and he could see the muscles come out on her back. If it came loose suddenly, she could be crushed under it. Though it looked barely attached, it didn't budge. She finally sat back with a disappointed grunt, then grinned at Hektor. "Sometimes big pieces come right off."

With a conscious effort, Hektor slowed his breathing.

"Laia," he said. "What is this place?"

"It was once going to be a Orthodox church. It got blown up during the Time of Tumults by a rioting mob. For a long time after that it was a water reservoir, before they got better management of the aquifers."

It may have been a cathedral, but the rioting mob part sounded like a romantic fancy of Laia's. Martian mobs usually confined their violence to each other. Blowing up their physical environment could too easily kill everyone. And there were huge cracks in the barrel vault overhead, patched with injected foam.

Laia scrambled up the largest of the fallen pieces of rock and stood above him. As he looked up past her he realized that the glints at the top of the niche came from the remains of an old mosaic, the haloed top of some saint's head.

She sat, straddling the rock, and looked down at him. "You know, I've heard that Bertilla Li Prakrit was here when the cathedral was destroyed. She must have been young then. I wonder what she thought when she watched the place go up."

"Who?" Hektor said stupidly.

"Bertilla. You know her. She died out in the Labyrinth. Probably not far from where your father's house is now." Laia sighed. "That was a time, wasn't it? The Empire had collapsed, and anything could happen. Not like now. Now the air's getting so thick you can't even breathe. And Mars just hangs there in the middle of it. I don't think it moves anymore."

"Laia," Hektor said as he climbed up to her. "How do you know anything about Bertilla Li Prakrit?"

"The same way anybody knows."

"How? Tell me."

She didn't look at him. "I wouldn't expect you to understand her, Hektor. She was something completely different than you are. Then we are, now. She always did what she felt."

He put his hands on her shoulders but her back was stiff and she did not relax back against him as she usually did. "Has Breyten been telling you these stories?" he asked.

"No, Breyten has not been telling me these stories." She was irritated. "Why are you always harping on him? I've told you all about it. You always ask about that, but you never ask about anything else. . . ."

"All right." He touched her earlobe with his fingertip. "What did you do with the earrings I gave you?"

She snorted. "There. That wasn't so hard, was it? I gave them to Nyasa Tso." She turned and looked at him. "Kind of a going-away present." Relenting a little, she slid herself across the rock until her behind was pushed against him. "We were lovers when we came to that party. I think you must have guessed that. But she's never forgiven me for you. It made her so angry! I don't know why. I don't know what she expected. I'm never sure what people *expect*."

Now he understood Nyasa's mood. Hektor absently massaged Laia's neck as he thought. It wasn't unusual for heterosexual women of Nyasa and Laia's class to have affairs with each other when they were young. It was part of growing up. It was serene and calm and evaded some of the brutalities that came along with being that age. The problem came when it was time to grow up and someone discovered that it wasn't just a phase after all.

Suddenly Laia was crying. "Oh, Hektor, is that all there's ever going to be to it? Love affairs, dinners, meetings, marriages, children? Is that all we're ever going to do? Are we going to breathe the same goddamn stagnant air until we suffocate? I can't stand it. I can't stand it!"

"Laia—"

"For a moment it looked different. Remember? When those lunatics murdered DeCoven. Right there in the middle of the Feast of Gabriel! You saw it, you got blood on yourself. Didn't you feel the whole planet tilt under your feet? I did. But then it all settled down again. The sand got in our wheels and we sank right back into the dune. Soon ice and carbon dioxide will cover us and we'll turn into mummies. . . ."

Her skin was hot under his fingers and her body shook with her breathing. Her pupils were dilated in the darkness of the cathedral.

"Come on," he said. "Come on."

They slid down the tumbled rock and down into a side chapel. Mosaics, icons, lamps, were long gone. The rock walls were scored with crude chisel marks. He tugged her jacket off and rolled it into a pillow. Then, ever a gentleman, he lay down on the hard rock and let her kneel down on top of him.

There was something excitingly angry about their coupling. He wasn't sure where it had come from, but he could feel it, in the way she turned her head away as she slammed up and down above him. She must have been hurting herself. He reached, slid her shirt up, and held the sides of her rib cage. She did not take his hands, as she usually did. The muscles of her belly swelled and shrank. He wondered what she saw beneath her closed eyelids.

After, she climbed off of him, and stood. Facing away from him, she tugged up the one trouser leg she had removed. She straightened her clothes and fluffed her hair, every gesture sharp, with a distinct end to it. The light coming in from overhead was getting faint. The day was ending.

"Hektor," she said, finally. "Do you believe in heroism?"

"Of course I do." He stood.

"No. I mean, do you really *believe* in it?"

"In that case, I don't know what you mean. I thought I did."

She turned to him. Her eyes were just dark shadows on her face. He peered into it. Martians were not used to involuntary darkness. Day and night had no meaning in the canyons, which were always active, and being out on the surface was a matter of deliberate choice. Standing here in the darkening, ruined cathedral disturbed him in a way he did not understand. It was as if the light was being sucked out of everything. Could even the tunnels and open spaces of the Valles Marineris turn dark like this, leaving their inhabitants clawing at each other? Martian civilization was a mold on the waxy hide of an orange, easily sponged off, leaving no trace save some residual toxins.

"I've seen where Bertilla died," she said musingly. "Out at the eastern edge of the Labyrinth. She carved her dying words on the wall."

No she didn't, he wanted to say. Hadn't Breyten himself said there were just some meaningless scratches on the rock? What had changed them into something with meaning?

He stepped forward and put his arms around Laia. He could feel the frantic beating of her heart.

"You saved me, you know," she said. "Saved me from . . . life is full of crevasses to fall into. They still find old explorer's bones in them, you know? Those people were crazy. They went out there, they didn't care if they ran out of air, or froze to death, and they fell right into holes because they were too involved in looking at the cliffs and the high tip-top of Olympus."

She whispered quickly, like a child reciting something she only half-remembered, and Hektor knew it wasn't true. He hadn't saved her, and she didn't even think he had. He'd only delayed her.

"There's always another one ahead," he said.

"Maybe. Maybe." She rested her head on his shoulder. They rocked back and forth, as if they were dancing, tired at the end of a long night, the last dance the band would play.

"I know I shouldn't ask this of you." Lon was uncharacteristically tentative. "It's not your job, God knows. But there's no one else to ask." A sunlit rock wall reflected red light into the room, staining the white cushions.

Hektor shifted in his seat. Most encounters with his father had some element of authority. This was almost pleading. He was hit with the delayed realization that his father now thought of him as an equal. He had grown up, in his father's eyes. It made him uncomfortable.

"Who else should you ask?" He waited a moment, but Lon did not speak. "You're worried about Breyten."

"You know, Hektor, there was a time when I thought Breyten was by far the more suitable of you two for a political career." He peered at Hektor as if expecting surprise.

"So you were wrong." Hektor shrugged. "Not too surprising, really. I was a poor student, disorganized, never in control. I'm sorry I spent the first part of my life disappointing you."

Lon nodded slowly. "There was a long time when you didn't seem a member of the family at all. You ran with that tunnel gang, what was their name. . . ."

"The Quito Mountaineers," Hektor said with some embarrassment. "Remember, the Sichuan War had heated up again, and they were in the news. We liked the name."

"I remember." Lon showed no sign of amusement. "You played at war on the surface. All of you went far beyond the bounds of normal adolescent games. You took random risks, when the risks of the surface are bad enough on their own. One day you tore your skintite and almost froze off your leg. And what were you doing? Showing a girl how quickly you could slide down a rock face, as if that's a useful skill."

"How did you know that?" Hektor asked, startled. He had crawled home and hid in his room. The bruising on his calf had gotten worse and he had started to worry, but been unwilling to tell his father what had happened and ask for help.

"You suffered nobly, Hektor. You'd read the story of the Spartan boy and the fox . . . absurd. Dying because of a flirtatious accident is not heroic. How did I know? Breyten told me. He knew what order things come in. It was hard for him, but he told me, and I had you treated. Enjoy having two legs, eh? I thought so."

"I never knew," Hektor said.

"Breyten has a romantic practicality." Lon sighed. "Or did. I don't know what to make of this all."

"All right, Father. Where is he?"

Lon wouldn't look at him. "It's an address down in Ringhofer's Fossa."

"Ringhofer's Fossa?" Hektor couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. *"Breyten?"*

"Yes, Breyten. He's a member of some club now. It has a silly name: the Friends of St. Rabelais, some such foolish thing. Sons and daughters of significant families, striving to make their family names a mock." He shook his head in disgust. "You have, I take it, heard of the place?"

"Well, of course I have. Who hasn't?"

Hektor certainly knew Ringhofer's Fossa. He had spent many hours of his early manhood there in that dark lubrication, the sweaty, almost Terran air that flowed there, seeming to make almost visible vortices.

Hektor remembered telling Breyten all about it once, flushed with adolescent sexual victory. Breyten, skinny and pale, had sat in his bed, arms around his knees, listening to Hektor's babbled boasting. He hadn't looked at Hektor, not once. Hektor had finally run down, stumbling over his words, and ended in midsentence. Open on Breyten's bed was a red-bound book, which Hektor recognized as a much-read copy of the *Iliad* he had himself given to Breyten for his tenth birthday.

Without another word, he had left Breyten's room, feeling shame: not for his actions, which had after all been delightful and demonstrated his manhood, but for using them as a sort of weapon against his brother. After that day he never again brought them up.

"Is Breyten still working for Trep as an agent in the Olympus Clubs?" Hektor said.

"How did you know that?"

Hektor chuckled. "How did you know I'd injured my leg? Breyten knows when a secret is poisonous. Is he still working?"

"Bad, when security is so easily penetrated." Lon looked wrathful. "Things are worse than I thought."

"Father! Things are always worse than you thought. Were you really going to send me after Breyten without telling me the real situation?" Now that he thought about it, Hektor was getting angry. "How was I supposed to do my job under those circumstances? Now tell me, is he still acting for you and Trep?"

Lon was long silent. "I don't know, Hektor. Forgive me for being so confused, but . . . I don't know. The Olympus Clubs seem to have largely disbanded, and those that are left are mere political pressure groups, of no more account than those people who want to drop ice asteroids into the upper atmosphere to make it rain. But, of course, Hounslow hasn't disappeared. What he wants hasn't disappeared. Where has it gone, then? What has happened? You're the only one who can find Breyten. You're the only one he'll talk to. I'm worried about him."

That saddened Hektor, in a way he didn't want to acknowledge. He could imagine his father directing all sorts of emotions at him: anger, respect, amusement, even love, but could not imagine that one, worry. It was always tacitly assumed that Hektor could take care of himself and if he didn't, well, that was just his own goddam fault for being such a fool. That had once given him a sense of immense freedom.

"Yes, Father."

He stood up, bowed briskly, and walked out. Lon Passman continued sitting, looking out of the round window at the rock wall, which was now deeply cut by shadows.

It was hot in the room. Not Martian hot, which could be comfortable for a Terran. *Hot.* And wet, as thick as the air Hektor remembered from the Amazon. He felt like he was sweating slithery gobs of semen. Jesus, why was he thinking that?

Probably because of the two naked women in the empty, gold-lined tub. They leaned their heads back, eyes closed, heads at opposite ends of the tub. One had fine skin and he could see the delicate vein in her throat. The other was darker and her huge breasts floated dreamlike in his vision.

"Sweat," the pale one said dreamily. "It all depends on how you feel it. I sweat quicksilver. I'll fill this tub, see if I don't. Here." She held a delicate pale-blue flower out to Hektor. "Smell."

Something was wrong here. He could feel it. He'd been invited into the clubhouse, not a hint of resistance, yet he'd been here an hour and not found anything out. Nevertheless, politely, he leaned forward and inhaled. A shy, fugitive scent, gone before he could really smell it.

"Breyten Passman," he said, not for the first time. "He's supposed to be up here."

"No one's *supposed* to be anywhere." The second one opened her eyes. "Don't you know that?"

The room's heat redoubled and Hektor's skin flushed. The itch of his clothing against him was almost intolerable. He shifted and—he had an erection. How had that happened without his noticing? And it *hurt,* goddamit, like a young man's raging morning hard-on. He felt like it was ready to explode.

The one with the flower raised a hand toward him, still without opening her eyes. It swelled in his vision.

"See?" she said. "What did I tell you?"

He squinted, trying to focus. Her hand was dripping like a squeezed sponge, and the liquid was gleaming silver. Hektor's clothing was hideously uncomfortable. He wanted to strip naked in the blessed hot air and slide into the tub with both of them. The silver sweat would heal him. He felt like he could have both of them, and a dozen other women besides.

He pushed himself back, gulping air that burned his throat. "Breyten," he managed. "Breyten Passman. He's my brother. I want to talk to him."

"It's a side effect," she explained. "The quicksilver sweat." She giggled. "Just a side effect of what I really want."

An upside-down head poked through a riser entrance just above them. Hektor focused muzzily. It was Breyten. He grabbed the bar at the entrance, swung himself around and dropped to the floor. He grinned.

"Hektor! Good to see you. Glad you could come visit. I see you've met Brenda and Plon."

"Yes," Brenda drawled. "He's worried about sweating. Seems to be his main issue."

"Well, we all have those." And then Breyten leaned over and kissed her, a deep, tongue-lashing kiss. Hektor watched in stunned dismay. Hallucinations. He was having hallucinations. The second woman, Plon, climbed on Breyten's back, pressing her large breasts against him. Breyten reached a hand back and cupped a buttock.

"You can come back here later," Breyten said, standing. "To see them, if you want. I think they'd like that." There was silver clinging to his lips, great stains of it on his clothing. He smelled of some nostril-clogging, flowery perfume. "But right now we need to talk."

"Let's leave here," Hektor said. "Out on the street—"

"No." Breyten was firm. "This is my place now. You'll have to deal with me here."

They walked through several rooms before they got to where Breyten wanted to go. Two men copulated on a blower-powered air bed of the sort used in hospitals. They grunted noisily, competing with the roar of the misadjusted blower. A woman with long hair puked in a corner, not into a drain, just on the floor, getting her vomit in her hair and smearing it irritably with her fingers. A group of about six people lay on the floor in one room, clothing disarranged as if they had all just had sex without taking it off, snoring with desperate tenacity. Hektor recognized one of them, a delicate-looking boy with long eyelashes, formerly an austere wearer of functional coveralls who worked with a rescue team on Tharsis ridge. His fingernails were colored with rainbows. Hektor had seen a rainbow, on Earth. They did not occur on Mars.

"Here, here." They sat down on some mossy stones underneath a waterfall. It was a statement of most un-Martian extravagance. Intellectually, Hektor knew that water was efficiently stored in almost any form. Given adequate energy generation, a waterfall made as much sense as any other. Emotionally, he found it a chilling statement, like letting your blood flow out over your skin in order to show off its color. Breyten contemplated the extravagantly splashing water, then ran his fingers under it and let the water drip wastefully onto the stone floor. The image of blood recurred, and Hektor shook his head at his own mental extravagance.

Breyten handed him a bottle. It was Terran wine, Andean. Shipping it here must have been hideously expensive. Seeing his brother's confusion, Breyten took it back, gulped at the neck, and thrust it out again. Hektor sipped reluctantly. This was no way to drink fine wine, even to prove a point.

"This is the life, eh, Hektor?" Breyten's eyes gleamed at him.

"Father's worried about you," Hektor said.

"He's always worried about me." Breyten burped, then paused for a moment to contemplate how fine a thing he had just accomplished. "First it's because I don't have a good enough time and don't hang around with women, then it's because I'm having a too-good time and am hanging around with women."

Damn it, that was true enough. True enough, and not true at all.

"What's happened, Breyten. What's brought you here?"

Breyten frowned, as if not quite understanding the question. "I'm here, Hektor. I choose where I am, don't I? I choose what I do. Just like you."

Hektor felt a surge of irritation. "You know what I mean. You know what you're supposed to be doing."

"I'm *doing* what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Breyten—" Hektor controlled himself. "Father wants to talk to you. He really is worried. And I'm worried about him. He's getting old, now. I think things are getting to be too much for him. . . ."

"Well, well, so now Hektor's trying to get into Daddy's good graces. A little late, isn't it? Well, don't try to use *me* to do it, all right? Suck up on your own account."

This was too much. "God, Breyten, are you really that pissed off about it?"

"About what?"

"About Laia."

There was a moment of silence, then Breyten laughed. It wasn't a forced, nervous laugh, but one of genuine pleasure. Hektor had just said something genuinely stupid. "Laia? Really, Hektor, you are making less sense every second. What, you think you stole her from me, and I'm chewing my heart every time you sleep with her? Come on now. You're chasing around the wrong planet completely." He looked merrily at Hektor. "Are you still seeing her?"

"No," Hektor said reluctantly. "I'm not." Her final note had been cool, and not at all a surprise. They had never again made love after that day in the abandoned cathedral.

But long ago, just before the Landing Day party, Breyten had said that a woman he was interested in would be there. Who had it been, if it had not been Laia Korvengeld? Someone who had told him stories of Hounslow at St. Hilarion's.

"My God," Hektor said. "Nyasa Tso."

It was a hit. "What about Nyasa Tso?" Breyten's voice was suddenly measured.

"Nyasa was the woman you were interested in. No wonder she's always so pissed off at me." Not because of Laia. Because of Breyten.

"Is she?" Despite all control, Breyten could not keep a hint of pleasure from coming into his voice.

"Of course. Because she realized how much more suitable I am for her, and doesn't like it. But she doesn't see you any more, does she, Breyten? Because she realizes what a disaster you would be as a husband. No matter what else happens, she's going to have to marry me, or someone like me. That woman's got her head screwed on straight. Besides, she must suspect the sex will be better."

The color washed across Breyten's face like dawn, and his fist, launched from the side, slammed into Hektor's temple.

He fell off his mossy rock onto the water-covered floor. The blow had not been hard, but he could feel it flaring on the side of his head. He did not try to get up. The water soaked his side.

Breyten stood over him. "Nyasa loves me, Hektor! You can play your little social games, and manipulate things, and push family alliances back and forth, but that will never change. Never!"

"Fine," Hektor said, pushing himself up. "Just fine. Keep yourself warm with that. But you've given her up by coming here. By living here. Just as you've given up Father, and everything else that you used to think was important." He was dizzy, much drunker than he could possibly have been from the little he'd had to drink. "Nyasa doesn't care about you anymore. Neither does Father. He just wanted me to make sure that you weren't dragging the family's name in the mud."

An instant of rage flashed across Breyten's face, and was gone. "In that case, say hello to Nyasa for me."

Breyten turned away and two very large men with the look of professional bodyguards appeared to escort Hektor back out to the street.

"Breyten and Laia are *not* lovers," Nyasa Tso said. "*That* I would know." She gestured at Hektor, and they moved out of the way of two soldiers running past, laying a comm line.

"I'm not saying they are." Hektor raised his voice to be heard above the din in the rapidly swelling tent. "I'm saying they're in contact. Close, continuous contact. When was the last time you talked to Breyten?"

"I'm sure you can guess the last time I talked to Breyten. Just after the execution of Brian Martens."

"You thought he'd gone crazy. First the Olympus Clubs, then the Friends of St. Rabelais—"

"Don't tell me what I thought," Nyasa said crisply. "Leave it alone." She held up a hand and turned away, to speak into a sonic focus. "Cool down those IR signatures a bit, Torson. You look like you're barbecuing out there. You're supposed to look like you're *trying* to conceal them."

Hektor peered at the infrared map image that floated above their heads, but couldn't make anything out. Colored dots flickered on a map of Mareotis.

"Nyasa! Remember what we agreed." Hektor had pulled strings to get assigned as a Legislative observer to this military exercise, not because he was interested in counter-insurgency contingency plans, but because he wanted to talk to Nyasa. "We're after the same things. You wanted to marry Breyten. You couldn't. I piss you off: I'm his brother, I became Laia's lover, you wish you didn't find me interesting, you're afraid you're going to end up married to me like both of our families want. Fine, fine."

"Well, that's a crisp little summary, isn't it?" She was furious.

"I just want to get *on* with it." Hektor jumped as the framework of the command post snapped into place.

The command post had transparent walls, and was set up on a ledge just below the rim of one of the Mareotis fossae. The opposite wall of the huge crack loomed a few hundred meters away. Troops rapelled down it like sliding beads. Beyond it the flat thumb that was the eroded shield of Alba Patera pushed its way insolently into the dark sky's dusty pink skirts.

Nyasa examined a real-time processed satellite image of the Mareotis Fossae to see what of their emplacement was detectable from orbit. At subliminal gestures from her, the image swelled and shrank dizzyingly.

"Arunjuez," she snapped. "The edge detectors are giving us a length of unerased tread, map coordinates," she reeled off a string of numbers. "The sun falls a few more degrees, gives us some shadow, that'll be clear enough to eyeball from five clicks. Blow it off, and make sure it doesn't happen again."

She turned to Hektor. "Do you think Trep's crazy?"

Hektor shrugged. "So Trep is wasting most of your budget chasing around the canyons looking for Hounslow, even though he is not guilty of any defined crime." He smiled at her. "Don't look so surprised. You think I'm fooled by these exercises? You've been quartering the entire planet, searching out every anomalous IR trace, albedo variation, radio burst. And you haven't found anything."

"No."

"And what would Trep do if he did find Hounslow?" Hektor found himself getting upset. "Stand him up on a canyon rim and shoot him? Display him in a cage hung up in Pyramid Square? What? Colonel Trep is an old friend, but if this doesn't change, I'll have to raise the issue in the Legislative. It would end his career. I don't want to have to do that."

"Calm down, Hektor. You're not the only one who thinks it's ridiculous. But what else is Trep supposed to do? Everyone else thinks the crisis is past, that the assassination of DeCoven was just the dramatic last gasp of a moribund organization. The Governor-Resident's office, Union Internal Security, the Legislative—but you know all about it, don't you?"

"I do. We've all decided we have more important things to do. Except me. That's why I'm talking to you."

She pursed her lips and looked at him sidelong. "And here I thought you were talking to me because you were interested in me."

"I—" Startled by the sudden flirtatiousness, he peered at her.

She laughed. "Oh, Hektor, it's all mixed up, isn't it? Don't be shocked."

"Oh, I don't know, it's kind of pleasant to be shocked. And here I thought I'd gotten used to everything."

The laughter faded and her face regained its serenity. "So what *do* you want, Hektor?"

"Tell me about Laia Korvengeld," he said.

She pursed her lips and he sensed that, despite her own resolutions, she was annoyed. "Dear Laia? Anything that's important to you you must already have figured out, or you don't deserve your reputation."

"Are you expecting me to blush? Come on, Nyasa, I'm serious. And mixed up as things might be, I'm not going to fight with you about Laia. But she sees Breyten, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't know that," she said. "But then it's been a long time since I've talked to either one of them." She gazed bleakly at Hektor. "You cut me off from both of them. Oh, don't protest, you didn't know, you didn't do it on purpose, but that's exactly what you did, and maybe you did know, a little, at that. So, Laia's joined Breyten? It doesn't surprise me. Shouldn't surprise you either. She wants it to happen. Maybe she's decided to take a hand in making it happen."

"The Olympus Clubs, or whatever they call themselves, will move," Hektor said. "You know that, I know that, Trep knows that. Eventually, Hounslow will act. And the result will be a little more than the death of one time-serving bureaucrat."

Nyasa looked at the busy, intent military scene around them. "Yes. What do we do, then?"

Hektor opened his mouth to speak, but the air was no longer in his lungs, and there was a sharp pain in his eardrums. He fell back from her and pulled his hood down over his head, feeling it slurp into the skintite he wore under his clothes.

It took all his self-control to let the air slide slowly through his lips, avoiding rupture as the lungs reexpanded. Nyasa, more quickly adjusted, yanked at his arm.

The tent collapsed, falling in great folds of transparent fabric. Struts cracked and sprang open. The disciplined troops were already slicing through the now-encumbering material with hot knives, tossing it into stacks.

Quickly, everything was put back into order. There had been no casualties, and Hektor began to gather that the disaster, which he had interpreted as the first, savage attack of the resurrected Olympus Clubs, was part of the military exercise, a reminder to the troops of the consequences of living on Mars. Ten minutes passed before Nyasa could turn and speak with him again.

"We trip them early," Hektor said, picking up the thread of the interrupted conversation. "Get them to go before they are ready, before they plan to. Keep the pressure on. Running around the rough country is exactly what they'd want us to do, because it's futile. They're amateurs, Nyasa. They're impatient. If we push right, someone will make a mistake."

"Oh?" She was already warming to his plan. He could feel it. "And what lever do we have on them that will get them to do it?"

"We have two, actually. Breyten Passman and Laia Korvengeld."

"How did it happen?" Hektor stepped into the black-shrouded front hall. "Was it—?"

It took Trep, huddled in his mourning cloak, a moment to answer. "There's no real answer to that, boy. Take a look at him, see what you think."

Hektor glanced up the stairs, half-expecting to see his father at the top, ready to speak and explain. "I wish I could have talked with him, before. That is, if it wasn't an accident."

"Maybe he'd said all there was to say." Trep gestured at the stairs. "Breyten is already here. You should go up. Here." He handed Hektor a package.

"I—" Trep looked at him, but Hektor knew he had no interest in anything Hektor might say to him at this moment. He had his own grief to consider. "Thank you, Colonel."

Hektor climbed the stairs to where his father's body lay.

He passed through the round-windowed outer room where he and Lon had had their discussion about Breyten, but paused at the black-garlanded door to the bedroom. In all the years of his life, he had never been permitted to step through that portal. His father's private chamber was a secret forever closed to him. He reached out and, holding his breath, pushed. The door swung open.

Lon Passman lay on the bed, clad in black, outdoor boots on his feet, gauntlets on his hands. He looked ready to step into the thin-aired cold of outside, to feel the ragged sand shift beneath his feet. He was just taking a brief rest before going out of the airlock.

Hektor walked up to the bed and kissed his father's cold forehead. It was rough under his lips, contorted in a puzzled frown, as if Lon himself was wondering how it was he had come to die. Hektor turned his head, and found himself looking up at what Lon must have seen every night when he went to bed and every morning when he awoke.

"Does it look like her?" Breyten asked, from where he sat at the desk. "You remember her better than I do. Is that her?"

"Yes, Breyten, it's her. A good likeness."

"She looks so young."

"She *was* young. Not too much older than I am now."

The painting of their mother was sharp and hard-edged, her form clearly defined against the red rocks behind her. The paint was translucent, making the painting seem to recede into the wall. Her face was strong, almost blunt. She wasn't pretty.

"I barely remember her." Breyten sat slumped with sadness, an emotion which sat poorly with his extravagant clothing and eye makeup. He had not changed his style for the death visit, and the deliberation of this lack of duty set Hektor's teeth on edge.

"I—" Hektor looked at the painting. It swam in his vision, the edges got hazy. "I should remember her better. She was never anything but Mother to me. She died before I got old enough to know her as anything else."

"She sacrificed herself, didn't she? To save the others. She was a hero."

"No, Breyten." Hektor kept his voice gentle, though he felt the baying of some violent rage inside. "No. It was an equipment failure in her crawler that stranded her in that sandstorm. A stabilizer on her crawler froze. Some tech screwed up, Breyten. She was a brave woman doing a dirty and necessary job who died in the course of her duty. Isn't that enough for you?"

Breyten straightened from his deliberately slouched position and for a moment Hektor saw the severe Breyten he remembered. Then, as if recalling his role, Breyten lost tension in his muscles and slid back down to an almost supine posture.

"Remember, once, Hektor, when I told you about Bertilla Li Prakrit?" Breyten's tone was casual, but Hektor sensed the tension under it.

"I remember." He also remembered Laia's version, in the abandoned cathedral.

"I've found out a lot more about her since then." Breyten's tone was earnest. "I found where she died, for one thing."

"That place where you found the valve? Where there was nothing but claw marks on the wall—nothing at all recognizable."

Breyten jerked but didn't look at him. "Well, I guess I didn't look carefully enough." He spun on his seat, his posture forgotten again. "But what's important is not how she died, but how she lived! They had a real Martian government, separate from anything on Earth, anything from outside." He spoke breathlessly. "The Orthodox caretaker government was incomprehensibly corrupt. Air was a commodity to be hoarded. People suffocated rather than submit . . . Prakrit started the communities on Tharsis Ridge, among the volcanoes. They were so sharp, so defined! That could have been us, Mars. But she was killed, betrayed by people she trusted. There was supposed to be air for her in that cul de sac. There was nothing. She half expected it. She knew how dangerous she was. After her death, once the Tumults were over, Earth was allowed to reimpose its rule. And that's the way it's been ever since."

Hektor hunched intently over his father's body. Lon had suffocated during a stroll on the surface to watch the sun set over the Noctis Labyrinthus. Had it been accident, or suicide? Accident, for a man who had lived his life so intimate with the surface, seemed unlikely, but the possibility always lurked, even for the most attentive. The face of Mars never for an instant relaxed its unforgiving expression.

"So, in other words, you're saying that Father's life had no validity." Hektor's voice was not quite even. "All the difficult political decisions he made to keep Mars within the Union . . . all just pointless farce? He should have been more like Bertilla. You think."

"That's not what I'm saying!"

"Oh, isn't it?" It had been an accident, Hektor was suddenly sure. That was an embarrassing feature of the death that no one would talk about. But Lon would never have deliberately killed himself in such an uncommunicative, purposeless way. His final work would have had meaning. That was why accidental death was a bad death. There was no art to it. Well, it was a son's job to give his father's death meaning. He would do his best.

Hektor looked at Breyten. He knew what Breyten feared. In his older years, Hektor had learned to be kind, to stay away from things like that and not use them as weapons. That didn't mean he'd forgotten how. "You were always his favorite. He told me. I don't mind, it happens, you can't do anything about that. That's why it hurt him so much. . . ."

"No!" Breyten stood and, dissipated look forgotten, paced tensely around the small room. "He knew what—"

"He knew what had become of you. He sent me to check, to see you. You never came back here, did you? He asked you, but you wouldn't. He never saw his son again." As he spoke, and saw the look on his brother's face, Hektor felt a hot point just in the center of his chest. Did anything justify this? "It's just as well you never succeeded in joining the Olympus Clubs, I guess."

Breyten looked down at his father's body and said nothing.

"So, after our mourning is done, just go back to your little clubhouse and relax. In a few days, Hounslow and his organization will have ceased to exist." He spoke casually.

Breyten stared. "What do you mean?"

Hektor shrugged. "Oh, I'm not privy to the military plans. Trep keeps those behind his forehead. But the Legislative has released the Vigil to do its tasks. Finally. They know where the Olympus people are, the ones who have supposedly disappeared: Nereidum, Focas, the rim of Hellas." He named places Trep and Nyasa had found traces, flinging away intelligence data with abandon. "I don't know what they'll do. Actually, I don't *care* what they'll do. As long as they take care of the problem. Nyasa seems to have things well in hand. You know her."

Breyten was speechless. Hektor felt a great sorrow. If it had been anyone but Breyten at the Friends of St. Rabelais, Hektor would have been fooled. It made sense for anyone, to fall into debauchery when revolution had failed. For anyone, but not for Breyten. If Breyten had not come home after the Olympus Clubs disbanded, it meant that they still existed, and that action was still going to occur. Bloody action, if Hounslow had his way. Hektor and Nyasa had just pulled the first lever their hands could reach. Their joined hands, tugging on their old lovers.

Hektor turned away from him, so that Breyten could not see his face. "I think father's sacrifice will not have been in vain," he said. "It achieved what it needed to. Put on your mourning."

Hektor opened the package Trep had handed him. It contained a swoop-sleeved mourning cloak covered with many buttons.

Breyten stood. Tiny sparkling balls flickered on his jacket. After a moment's hesitation, he pulled on his own cloak. When he was done, he looked normal, for the first time in a long time the Breyten Hektor remembered, pale severe face above dark clothing.

"Let's go," Breyten said.

A dozen or so people waited in a room off the main hall. If possible, every Martian liked to pick the intimate mourners at his private funeral, via secret missive sent as a consequence of the will's activation. Accepting the mourning invitation of even a familiar and life-long enemy was considered an honor, even if the invitation should prove part of some last desperate machination.

Hektor knew, from a warning Trep had given him, what to expect, but he was still startled at what appeared before his eyes as he passed through the door. Among Trep and several other important Fossic and Chasmic Party officials, all of them old friends and worthy opponents in the clubby atmosphere of the Legislative, sat the violent director of the supposedly disbanded Olympus Clubs, Rudolf Hounslow, radiating a dark energy.

He had a stone head plunked massively down on his shoulders without the feeble intervention of a neck. His large nose had once been broken and healed crookedly and scars lined his jaws, traces of old violence, though Hektor had heard the rumors that they were all the result of surgery deliberately intended to roughen his appearance.

He stood and, deliberately ignoring Breyten, bowed slowly to Hektor. "We have lost a Martian," he said. His voice was unremarkable.

Silently, Hektor bowed back. Hounslow's unsubtle refusal to acknowledge Breyten's existence was confirmation, if any was needed, that they already knew each other.

Everyone sat down and told stories about Lon Passman, as was the ancient, immemorial custom. Hektor, oversensitized by his contact with Breyten and his newly coined histories, wondered how old a ceremony it really was.

After a series of more-or-less enlightening personal reminiscences by Fatima Weissman, Miriam Kostal, Colonel Trep, and Theodore Ah, Rudolf Hounslow finally spoke.

"I only met Lon Passman once, but I will always remember it." He paused. For all his lack of expression, he knew how to start a story, Hektor reflected. "It was more than twenty years ago. I had camped out in the Noctis Labyrinthus. I was there to think. That was where some of my thoughts crystallized. It was very near where the unfortunate Bertilla Li Prakrit met her death."

Hektor looked around, startled, but everyone else seemed to accept the name as normal.

"She was betrayed. I was betrayed. My air gave out. I was out on the sands of Mars, meditating on Mars, when Mars came in to me in a most unwelcome way." He bared his teeth in recognition of the irony, making it obvious that irony was not a skill of his. "Something in the carbon dioxide filter had malfunctioned, and my blood alarm went off." A wrathful expression crossed his face. "Those responsible have slept quietly for twenty years, but now—" He stopped himself with a visible effort.

"I stumbled outside when I realized what my fate was, to die cleanly on the surface, rather than suffocate in my tent. I stood outside and felt the cold of Mars on me. I looked around at the cliffs. A figure stood on a far outcrop. I wondered if it was the ghost of Bertilla, come to free me."

Since Hounslow had clearly adopted the Bertilla Li Prakrit story from Breyten recently, Hektor doubted that very much.

"It was Lon Passman. I turned from him. I was no longer interested. I was ready. But he came. He recognized my situation and he came down. I was barely conscious by the time he did. He shared his air, though he had only enough for himself. He was willing to sacrifice himself for me, for Mars. With the new oxygen, I could think again, and I supervised the reconstruction of the carbon dioxide filter. That gave us enough usable air to get us to an emergency station."

Hounslow barely moved, but gave the impression of settling back in his seat, piece spoken.

There was a moment of stunned silence at this revelation, then Nyasa Tso smoothly described an incident in which she had been involved in the Legislative where Lon Passman had shown his parliamentary skills. The mourning broke up soon afterward.

Hektor and Nyasa walked a passage in the wall of Ius Chasma. Sun slanted in between the heavy rock bastions. The mood in the streets was dark. Most of the storefronts along the passage were half-shuttered, ready to be slammed closed in case of riot, their proprietors, mostly Malay and Lebanese in this part of Ius, peering suspiciously out from behind their desks.

Hektor stopped at a window. In the middle of the display of small devotional figurines, popular saints and the like, was the massive figure of a woman wearing an old-time air tank. Bertilla Li Prakrit. It was the fourth or fifth one he'd seen in the course of their walk.

"This is intolerable!" he said. "She's everywhere. And she's not real, dammit, she's not real. Does everyone believe in her now?"

Nyasa was amused. "I suspect they do. There are even songs about her. You've heard them. Does it drive you crazy?"

"Damn right it does. It means that Hounslow has half-won already. He's her spiritual heir, haven't you heard? Come to pick up her mantle, so long buried in the sand."

Casually, as if she did it all the time, Nyasa took his arm. "Hounslow's perfectly capable of making up his own stories. That mourning tale, now. . . ."

"Bad luck, to tell lies at a mourning." Hektor knew he sounded stiff, like a censorious old priest, but despite himself, he felt that his father had been somehow compromised by it, as if Hounslow's lies and misinterpretations were yet one more burden Lon would have to bear in the land of the dead. "Are you telling me that Hounslow made the whole thing up?"

"Oh, not at all."

"And how do you know?" The challenging tone in his voice should have been used for Hounslow.

"Trep told me. And he heard the story from Lon when it happened, before Hounslow was anyone at all. He thought it was just irritating that Hounslow had done that, but I suspected it would mean something more to you."

"You were right."

"According to Lon," Nyasa said, "Hounslow was lying unconscious when Lon found him. A quick check of his gear showed he'd screwed up a valve installation."

"Hounslow said it was sabotage."

Nyasa shook her head. "Maybe Hounslow did mutter some conspiracy theory while regaining consciousness. I think that's the way his brain works. But the damage to his valve was clearly visible to eyeball inspection. No one traveling on the surface would have allowed that to get away, and what kind of sabotage is so easily detected? The problem, according to Lon, was that Hounslow insisted on using antique equipment."

Hektor felt a thrill. "Antique?"

"Well, yes. He must have bought his skintite valve in an antique store. Feeble little thing, Earth design probably. Lon had to cut it off and replace it from his kit. And the rest of the story—Hounslow's supervising the rebuilding of the filter, all that—completely made up. Lon did that. Hounslow lay on the ground, barely conscious, drooling. Not a great image for the Olympus Clubs."

Hektor thought of the valve that Breyten had somewhere, carefully wrapped up. Bertilla's valve, it had become now. Where had it really come from? Their father *had* taken them on many trips to the western reaches of the Labyrinth. It had been one of his favorite places, perhaps because he had met their mother there, when they were both working rescue for the region.

"My father might have died by accident," Hektor said. "Just like that, just the way Hounslow almost did. I'll never be sure. All that time he tried to get in contact with Hounslow, using the power of that old bond. And Hounslow always refused. Refused, until he could accept the last invitation, and come to look at my father's dead body. Maybe to imagine Lon Passman looking down into Rudolf Hounslow's own dead face, suffocated in the Labyrinth, in some other place in history."

"Maybe," Nyasa said dubiously, not as carried away by the image as Hektor was.

Hektor looked at her. She was serene and carefully polished, as if disaster didn't taint the air. In the future, he wondered, would they rewrite their own history? Demote Breyten and Laia to supporting roles, whose job was bringing the principals together? In the open, in their words, perhaps they would, the way people edited unfavored relatives from family pictures. But somewhere in their hearts, they would always know the truth of it. And the less they spoke it, the sharper and more alive that truth would be.

"I want to find her," he heard himself say.

She stopped. "Why?" She didn't have to ask who.

"She can't throw herself in with Hounslow. She *can't*. What does she think she's *doing?* It's doomed, it's all doomed, and we can't just let it happen, not that way. . . ." He trailed off, appalled at the spilling idiocy of his own words.

"You can't save either of them from the consequences of their own decisions," Nyasa said coolly. "Not Laia. Not Breyten."

"I can try," Hektor said stubbornly. "We both should."

Nyasa was silent for a long time. Did he really think that it was just a sense of responsibility that drove him? He had to see Laia again, if only for one last time. Did Nyasa feel that need too?

"I can't tell you," Nyasa said, after a long pause.

"Nyasa—"

"I *can't.*" Listening more carefully, he finally heard the desperation in her voice. "I don't know myself where she is. It was part of the agreement we reached . . . I pushed myself away, distanced myself. So I am not permitted to know. But I still can get in touch with her and let her know. What she does after that is strictly up to her."

Hektor knew the pressures on Nyasa. She was an officer of the Vigil. For her to have a conduit to a member of Hounslow's organization, and to conceal it from her superiors, was a serious breach indeed. But in the midst of so many conflicting loyalties, it was impossible to be completely serene with one's own.

And if Nyasa was telling him this, it meant she trusted him. He hoped.

"Will you do it?" Hektor asked.

"Yes," she said softly. Then: "Tell me how she is, will you?"

"I will."

Two days after Lon Passman's funeral a well-armed group attacked the military stores at Krishetra's Camp, in Argyre. To the misfortune of Hounslow's movement, the attack was successful. The weapons stored there had been rotated out of service and were of second-echelon quality. Thus the guard put on them was inadequate. Nevertheless, the students assaulting the place lost five of their number. The survivors got away with a varied collection of security-bonded personal arms, three field-focused fission devices, one enhanced-radiation fission-fusion device, network comm equipment, and even several dozen canisters of aerosol nerve toxin, which should never have been stored in that facility. Heads would roll on Earth for that one.

It was just as Hektor and Nyasa had hoped. A group of hothead students, pressed beyond endurance and influenced by Hektor's information to Breyten, had acted without orders. Instead of a coordinated planetwide operation, this, for many hours, was the only attack. An open, unquestionable act of rebellion had occurred without being truly decisive.

Hektor watched the news with one eye as he maneuvered his crawler. Rudolf Hounslow, under observation since he had resurfaced for Lon Passman's mourning, had been liberated by an Olympus Club attack, ill-coordinated but of overwhelming strength. He had fled west of Tharsis and vanished.

Now that revolt had actually broken out, Hektor should have turned back. He knew that. But he didn't. Laia had communicated through Nyasa and agreed to meet him. He was almost at the coordinates.

He pulled his crawler in under an overhanging wall when the road finally vanished, replaced by chaotic terrain too rough for the crawler's spring wheels. The meteoric ejecta here at the edge of the Isidis Planitia were exceptionally large in size, giant bubbly boulders. The cliff's sharp shadow cut the crawler in two. Hektor could see stairs carved into the cliff's side.

The cliff marked the edge of the overlapping meteor craters south of Isidis, an area never melted flat like the plains to its north. It was a randomly torn area, a place of steep walls, dark declivities, shattered rock. Ahead was the jutting wall of a collapsed meteor impact crater. A light glowed there. Hektor forged toward it, climbing gingerly over the crumbling rock. He hoped that this was not a trap. But, whatever happened, Laia was there. Of that he was sure.

He finally made it to the light. A door had been carved in a rock outcrop and an airlock installed. Hektor raised his gauntlet and knocked. After a moment the access light came on and he entered.

"I never expected victory." Laia looked surprisingly fresh in the cold-rock-wall environment beyond the airlock. "At least not the way you understand it, your definition, your world." Her hair gleamed in the overhead lights, and her skin seemed taut and soft and aromatic.

"Maybe you didn't, but Rudolf Hounslow certainly did." Hektor kept his voice soft. "Isn't that right?"

"It is." Laia did not dodge or evade. "He may still get it."

"He won't. You know he won't. Come with me, Laia. My crawler's at the bottom of the cliff. We can be out of here and back to the Utopia magtrack in four or five hours."

"We could," she said dreamily. "And what then, Hektor? Where are we then?" She leaned against the wall, slinging her hip out.

"We're home, Laia. Home and safe."

"And whose home is that?" She shook her head. "I don't want to fight with you, Hektor. You're going to marry Nyasa. Oh, don't pout, it makes sense for both of you. Just wait and see. But I'm not sliding back into that dust pit!" She was suddenly fierce. "Never again. It doesn't matter what else I do."

He looked at her. She was ablaze, and it didn't matter what practical things he had to say to her. The more sense they made, the less interested she was in hearing them. She was helping tip the planet over and never wanted to see it set up in its safe place again.

"All right," Hektor said. "Take me to see Hounslow, then."

She looked at him, then reached out a hand. He took it. It was cool and soft and he wanted to pull her to him and put his arms around her. "You want to see it."

He nodded. "If I can do anything to stop it, I will. If I can't, I can witness it."

"I have a gun, you know," she said distantly. "It comes from that raid on Krishetra's Camp. I could make you do anything I want."

"Why don't you just ask me? What *do* you want?"

"I want you to come with me. To see Rudolf Hounslow."

Hektor was sealed in a bubble like a ghost. He had given everything up: his equipment, his mobility, his freedom. It had made sense to do it, while watched by Laia's eyes. Now that he had more time to think, he wasn't so sure. He was attached to the side of a large crawler. It bounced slowly across the chaotic terrain, sun blasting down on it.

It was part of a convoy. Hektor could see dozens of crawlers from his vantage point, and had no doubt that others moved at angles he could not see. It was a mysterious, detached image. Hektor didn't understand it. He was a witness, he could *see* it, but his testimony after would be uninformed, ridiculous. Nevertheless, he pressed his face to the flexible plastic of his bubble and stared.

Hounslow had managed it so well up to now. The surface organization of the Olympus Clubs had been disbanded in the wake of DeCoven's assassination. But they had remained, concealed under the calculated debauchery of the Friends of St. Rabelais. All of their reputations had been destroyed. Wasn't that the bravest act of all, on Mars?

But here they sat out in the open, visible to orbital satellites. Surely Hounslow didn't think he could fight an actual battle with the Vigil. Did he believe that organization was riddled with enough of his sympathizers that it would refuse to act? It seemed a hell of a gamble. The convoy continued moving westward across Isidis Planitia and into the great expanse of Syrtis Major as night fell and screened the scene from his eyes.

Silence, darkness, and a cold that he could feel sucking at the outside of his bubble. Frost began to form around him and even he, a Martian, started to shiver.

He peered outside again. He could now see moving lights and activity. It was all vague. Then the vagrant sweep of a shoulder lamp revealed a growing shape. A surface dome. A large one. Now that he had that bit of evidence, the rest of the motions made more sense. They were setting up camp, out here in the open, in the center of the expanse of Syrtis Major. What the hell was going on?

A click, and the door behind him opened. He turned, expecting Laia, but found, instead, a grim-faced man unfamiliar to him, dressed in a skintite.

"What's going on?" Hektor demanded. "Where's—"

Without speaking, the man slapped an air mask over Hektor's face and blew the bubble. Mars sucked at Hektor's skin with an infinity of flaring, stabbing teeth. He was able to suck frigid air through the mask, but everything else was a haze of meaningless agony. Was he flying? Had he been flung into orbit by the eruption of a volcano?

Suddenly there was air and warmth around him again. Propelled by a shove from behind, he slammed to the ground, but the pain of the impact was like a mother's loving pat compared to what he had just been through. He ripped the mask from his face and sucked in warm soothing air.

He blinked tearing eyes in the bright light and was finally able to see Rudolf Hounslow seated in front of him.

"You like that?" Hounslow said. "You like how that *feels?* Imagine last exhale, Hektor. Imagine what Bertilla Li Prakrit felt as she died. A little more and you wouldn't have had to imagine it."

Hektor's skin burned and itched. He wondered how many cells and blood vessels had ruptured through his exposure to the thin, cold air.

"There's a lot of imagination going on here," Hektor managed. "Are you really that hooked on Breyten's fairy stories?"

"It's time that everything was clean!" Hounslow shouted. "The muck's all over all of us, you worst of all, my friend. Bertilla was clean, she could have made sure that blood and sweat washed over all of us, but she died, she died, and she never made it. We will!"

Hektor looked into his eyes and saw a Mars suffused with blood. He felt the clean, hot, red glory. His life was a mess, everyone's life was a mess, compromised, petty, intricate, demanding. It would be such a relief to scream your throat out and let the blood flow out over the skin, to feel your blade slicing cleanly through flesh. Hektor felt it. He was Martian. He felt it as he'd seen it in Laia's eyes.

"Are you with us?" Hounslow demanded. "Your father would have been."

That broke the spell instantly.

"You can only lie so much, Hounslow." Hektor said. "He spent his life fighting you and what you represent. I will too."

Hounslow nodded slowly. "That you will. All the rest of your life."

Despite Hounslow's melodrama, Hektor felt like laughing. Hounslow, stone-faced and proud, was terrified and had no idea of what to do next. His plans had fallen apart like a child's sand sculpture.

So what would he do? Hektor glanced around at the tableau of silent figures that surrounded him. They tensely awaited the word of command. And he realized: Hounslow would never surrender, not to the pusillanimous, compromising, craven regime that ruled modern Mars.

"You goddam egotist," Hektor said. Though he addressed Hounslow, he pitched his words at the others in the room. Perhaps one of them might be convinced. "You can't win, so you want to make sure no one else does either. You've dragged your followers out into the middle of Syrtis Major to be slaughtered, so that your opponents are covered with their blood and you can be a legend. They could have disbanded and surrendered. Most of them would not even have been prosecuted. Instead . . ." He found himself becoming furious as he spoke. "Instead you,

you pygmy, want to sit on Bertilla's shoulders to make yourself seem tall. Your people aren't anything to you but Gabriel figures. You make me sick." And before anyone could react, he turned away from Hounslow's enraged face, dismissing him. "Take me away, Laia. If I'm going to die, at least let me do it where I don't have to look at his self-satisfied face."

He stood there by the airlock, using every grain of his self-control to stand up straight. Instead of thinking about Hounslow and the good possibility that he would be dead in a few seconds, he found himself wondering at how easily the name Bertilla had come to his lips. It seemed natural. So where was Breyten? Was he out there in one of Hounslow's domes?

"Take him away," Hounslow muttered. "His fate is irrelevant."

A hand touched Hektor's cheek. It was Laia. "Come with me." She led him down a tube to the next dome as Hounslow and his lieutenants, no one's opinion a bit altered by Hektor's diatribe, huddled in conference.

A dust storm grew over the horizon with the coming of dawn. It was not the season for one. They usually occurred near the solstice. It had a shape, almost solid, a dozen thick, striated columns that merged together into an overhanging cloud. It looked nothing like a wind-borne dust storm.

Crawlers, big ones, their precipitators off. In the angled dawn sunlight, the dust looked heavy, as if it was about to topple over on to where Hektor sat.

Hektor looked out over the arrangement of bubble domes on the rocky sand. He had stared out at it all night, but still it looked uninhabited. He'd toyed with the idea that it was all a clever trap, but rejected it. Hounslow had not gotten where he was by cleverness, and was far beyond any now.

"Make a break for it when the attack comes," she had said, and handed him a rolled skintite as a final present. He wasn't supposed to have one. He looked at her as she left his cell. She didn't look back, and it seemed she had forgotten him right then. But maybe his words to Hounslow had found their target after all.

He wore the skintite now. The dust clouds slowly dissipated. The military crawlers had reached their positions and were now waiting.

And that was the last movement he saw for the entire day. The military crawlers had no doubt dug themselves into defensive defilade. The sun rose, shaking itself free of the pink dust of the horizon and floating in the darkness overhead. Then it sank. Other than that, Hektor might as well have been looking at a photograph.

It was driving him crazy. Information, if there was any, slid through his body on the ether. He had no way of knowing what was going on, what demands and negotiations were being carried out as the army approached. The only thing he could figure out was that, if there was a visible army charging across the flat plain of Syrtis Major, there had to be an invisible one as well, creeping slowly though the ancient water channels to the west, where the craters once again grew more dense, closing off Hounslow's movement.

He was sure they were driving Hounslow crazy too. Somewhere out there were Trep and Nyasa Tso. Hektor could see their plan. Once again they would just sit and wait for something to break. They knew what a disaster a full-scale military assault would be.

The sun set, and the moon rose. Mars had no moon, not like that. The land was washed with a pale, unfamiliar glow. Hektor craned his neck to look up at the sky. A disk hung up there. It must have been a reflecting sheet that had been quickly fired up into orbit. It gave barely enough light to see, but certainly made surveillance much easier.

There was a flicker of movement at the periphery of Hektor's vision. He turned his head, remembering not to stare directly at what he was trying to look at, which gave less light sensitivity. What had it been? Another movement.

He breathed shallowly and scanned slowly across the plain. This time he saw it: two domes sank with dramatic quickness. Were Hounslow's people breaking camp? What crawlers he could see weren't moving.

Then it happened like a chain reaction. Domes blew out in quick series. It was not normal deflation procedure, but quick voiding, as had happened to the Vigil dome in Mareotis. This time, however, it was not part of an exercise.

Hektor opened his eyes wide and willed his retinas to be more sensitive. He was a witness, but couldn't *see* anything. The clear plastic he looked through suddenly seemed translucent and the pale light from overhead deceptive.

And then he saw them. Tiny figures struggled with the flopping plastic of a nearby dome as the air rushed out. They ran back and forth, clutching at themselves and each other, and Hektor suddenly realized that they had no air, that most of them were not wearing skintites. They were exposed, open, and then empty, as he had almost been the previous night. But then he had had a source of air. Most of these people did not.

They were dying. Right in front of him, they were dying, tens, maybe hundreds of people, on the surface, unprotected, exposed to Mars's casual rage. A few had breathers that they were sharing. Hadn't they, in an encampment surrounded by a hostile enemy force, slept in their skintites, air at their sides? He imaged Hounslow convincing them all that they could all now breathe Mars's impossibly thin air. That wasn't it. It was that they hadn't cared whether they could breathe or not.

They continued dying. It was an almost negligent process. No need to exert yourself to kill anyone on Mars. The planet is always there, waiting, ready to destroy your interloping, unadapted life. Some dug themselves into the sand, as if for protection, and died there, already half buried. Others ran, as if to outrun the death that already sat on their shoulders, lips on theirs.

Hektor saw two figures sharing a breather. One suddenly tore away and ran, sacrificing herself so that one, at least, could live. But the still-living one threw the breather up into the sky and fell himself. Hektor watched for the long moment it took the breather, glittering in the moonlight, to flip up, rolling in the dark sky, and then fall slowly back down to the dusty killing ground.

A woman wearing a skintite stopped, looked around herself, and opened her hood. As she collapsed, it almost looked as if she was smiling. Hektor looked at her, wondering.

By the time the Vigil crawlers were able to react, there was nothing moving on the plain of Syrtis Major.

"Was it just a feint to delay us?" Trep raged. "A distraction? All those people?"

If it had been that, Hektor thought, it hadn't worked. After checking, briefly but efficiently, for any signs of life, the Vigil had moved on, swerving to avoid the bodies. They could go back later: military forensics teams, witnesses, agents of insurance companies. Now there was work to do.

Hektor sat in a padded chair and worked on breathing. Nyasa sat next to him, waiting for him to recover, resting her shoulder against his.

"That stupid son of a bitch!" Trep was suited in military gear, crouched tensely in his seat, ready to burst from the crawler to lead if a close-order assault proved necessary. "Brutal, okay, I can deal with that. But stupid! Killing . . . all those people. In revolt. Their lives were up for grabs anyway. But just like that. . . ." The expression on his face was almost one of fear, Hektor thought. Exactly the emotion Hounslow would have liked to see there.

"Hounslow's made a break to the north, into the Nili Fossae," Nyasa said quietly. "Breyten's probably with him."

"And Laia's dead," Hektor said.

"No one's had time to look—"

"When they look, they'll find her." He looked at Nyasa. "Is Hounslow broadcasting? Any versions of the massacre?"

"He's under attack still. He hasn't had time. Or at least we haven't detected anything."

"Good. We can move first. This isn't a tragedy, Nyasa. This is a crime. He'll claim it's mass suicide, loyalty, all that. I know it. We want news teams on the ground by tomorrow morning, dawn. Can you arrange that?"

"The investigatory teams won't even be completely assembled at that point," Nyasa said.

"They have to be. The Massacre of Syrtis Major can mean any of a number of things. We know what we want it to mean."

"The Massacre of Syrtis Major? Is that what we're calling it?"

"That's what it *is.*" No one had been wearing skintites. Did that make sense? Had they really . . . it didn't matter anymore what they had *really* intended. Bertilla Li Prakrit no longer existed as the person she had once been. Neither would they.

Nyasa and Hektor went to work. As the crawler ground across northern Syrtis Major, they were in contact with every news service, the Legislative, with anyone who could witness what had occurred.

"Do we pass near a transportation point?" Hektor asked Trep finally.

"We'll be near the Syrtis magtrack in half an hour," Trep said. "You look like hell, Hektor. Get there, get home, get to bed. I'm not your superior officer, so I can't order you. But do it."

It didn't take any acting for Hektor to give a weary sigh. "I will," he said, though he knew he had to go somewhere else entirely.

He rather thought Trep knew that too, but the other maintained stern Martian decorum and accepted Hektor's story. Hektor felt the sharp grip of Nyasa's hand, and knew that she didn't.

Hektor jumped out of the crawler and made his way slowly up the rough trail that led to the rock called Camelback, in the approximate center of the Noctis Labyrinthus. He'd start there, at that old jumping-off place. He remembered running desperate races from there, orienteering competitions, day-long games of hide-and-go-seek. Those had once been the things by which life was measured.

Hektor knew that Breyten could evade him forever in the Labyrinth. But he didn't think he would want to do that.

There were many well-traveled trails in the grabens of the Labyrinth. They disappeared beneath the dust of the solstice storms, but immediately reappeared because of the compaction of the soil beneath.

Breyten and Hektor had always had their own favorite paths, usually ones that led dangerously up precipitous slopes. Hektor now found himself on one, dragging wearily along. In the narrow spots the trail was too scuffed up with many comings and goings for anything to be visible, but wherever the ground widened out, there was a single line of footprints forging on with determination. Hektor was sure they belonged to Breyten.

This trail climbed high, then dived into a local depression way above the bottoms of the grabens. Whether it was a dramatically eroded crater or a miniature fault was a subject that had much exercised them when they were boys. For a while Breyten had insisted that it marked the remains of an Acherusian city.

Hektor paused just at its lip. High to the right was a cairn perched on a precarious outcrop, put there, not to mark a trail, but just for the sheer exuberance of it, the thought that others would say "how the hell did they get up there?" Hektor remembered scampering up and down, each near fall a fresh exhilaration. A new rock now teetered at the very top of the stack, an immense flat slab that would topple with the winds of the first dust storm. Hektor continued up the trail.

Breyten stood so still that Hektor's mind tried to make him into another rock. It took an effort of will to finally see him. Hektor stopped.

"Hello, Breyten."

For an instant he thought that Breyten would not respond, that he had decoyed Hektor up here only to ignore him, the ultimate gesture of contempt.

Finally, he spoke. "Hello, Hektor."

The two brothers stood face to face, feet on the cold soil of their planet, and reached their hands out to touch. The contact was electric and Hektor shook, and realized how much of his meager reserves of energy he had just expended to climb up here.

Breyten didn't look any better. He shuddered and let go of Hektor's hands. He leaned over to pick up the bag that rested by his feet. "Oh, Hektor, those bastards. Those stupid *bastards*." He shook as if trying to cry in the thin air.

Hektor put his arms around him and held him. It had been a long time since he had done something like that. Breyten felt thin in his arms, bonier even than he remembered.

"I didn't know, I didn't know. *She* wouldn't have done something like that. She would just have died. Just have died to show others the path. But she wouldn't have shoved them into death like that, set off the reaction. It's not *right*."

It seemed to Hektor that Bertilla Li Prakrit had penetrated into everything.

Breyten flicked a glance at him. "You saw her, at the end, didn't you? She was there, Hounslow always trusted her, she was close to him. Laia—you knew her, Hektor. Not the way I did, but you knew her. She would not have allowed that."

So it was not Bertilla at all. Or maybe it still was.

"Laia expected a battle," Hektor said. "Where you would all die bravely. She didn't expect . . . what happened." She'd held him, one last time, before sealing him back in his bubble. He'd felt smooth skin under her clothing. No skintite. And all he'd thought about was how good it felt to touch her one more time.

"Well, they all died bravely after all, didn't they? Why does it make such a difference?" Breyten turned his anguished gaze on Hektor. "And you know what? After all that, the son of a bitch didn't want to die himself. We broke away from the main force, near the crater Antoniadi. He'd almost suffocated that time, all those years ago, and was too afraid. Too *afraid*."

He reached into the bag and pulled something out. Hektor looked—and closed his eyes. Opened them again. Leering at him, eyes bulged out grotesquely, was the severed head of Rudolf Hounslow. Martian executions followed a standard pattern.

"Jesus, Breyten—"

"He talked about the power of myth, of how maybe Bertilla herself had survived her death in the Labyrinth and gone on to lead the resistance, almost as if she had been resurrected to continue her great task. He raved. He'd purge the globe, then start on Earth, the real job. This was only the start. Destroying Mars was not much different than saving it. Not to him."

"He was God-mad."

"He *is* dead." Breyten, holding the head by its hair, waggled it at Hektor.

"Will you put that thing away?"

That made Breyten grin. "You think I'm crazy, don't you, big brother? You think I've gone around the bend." He flipped the head up in the air, caught it in the palm of his hand. "Well, perhaps I have. Don't you think I deserve it? What should we make him, then? A hero? They died bravely, fighting for what they believed in, Rudolf Hounslow standing nobly—"

"No!" Hektor knew it could be done: The Last Stand of Syrtis Major. And Mars would have another dramatic legend to whisper amid the stones. "No. Leave it, Breyten."

"You sure, Hektor? It could be useful . . . okay. I'll leave it up to you. Murder, suicide, resistance, acquiescence. You decide what it was, after all."

Breyten looked down the valley and across the Noctis Labyrinthus. They'd always liked this location, their secret spot, because of its view. He leaned back and, with a smooth, arching motion, putting every muscle in his body into it, pitched Rudolf Hounslow's head. It sailed slowly out and vanished into the deep canyon.

"Let him be a legend, a bogeyman," Breyten said. "He'll be good for that, won't he? He could have been another Bertilla Li Prakrit. He could have led us out of the darkness. Instead, he was just another goddamn murderer. We Martians make a lot of those, don't we? Odd, given how often we die anyway. Seems a big waste of time." He looked at Hektor. "Well?"

Hektor didn't flinch. "I'm ready if you are. I'm sorry."

Breyten shook his head. "You're the one you should be sorry for. You'll survive it all. You'll be alive. That's a bad fate."

"I'll have to deal with it."

They embraced again, for the last time.

Breyten stepped aside, paused for a long moment to collect his thoughts, and opened up his throat valves. He choked, and fell slowly to his knees. It was the Martian way of suicide: let the planet itself kill you, as it so wants to do.

Death is always ugly, and death on the surface is ugliest of all. Hektor did not turn from his brother's agony. He held him and provided the ancient service of the assistant. He pushed hard on the carotid arteries, cutting off blood flow to the brain. Unconsciousness intervened quickly, and Breyten was dead in a few moments. His body huddled in Hektor's lap, arms around his waist.

It was a long time before Hektor stood, to start digging a resting place for his brother's body.

* * *

The scattered bones and skulls were kept static charged to prevent dust accumulation. The curving walls that stretched out of sight were carefully calculated to funnel prevailing winds through the center of the Memorial, blowing sand off the preservative-matrix-encased bones. They sometimes vanished under particularly heavy dust storms, but it didn't take more than a week for the wind funnel to clear them again.

Each skull and bone had an identification number on it in gold. Hektor could see the gleaming line on some of the nearer ones, bold on femurs, tiny on ribs. Skull and bone fragments were not gold-numbered, though their identity was kept in a database. He could have called the data up on his pad at home and practiced computer-aided forensic-pathology reconstruction, a grisly hobby among some obsessed Martian citizens. There were over two hundred separate gold numbers on the Memorial bones, one for each victim of the Massacre.

He could pull rank, Hektor thought. In the middle of some dark night, only the moons for company, he could wade out there among the rib cages and shallow stacks of metacarpals and find Laia's bones. Her number was on record. The eternal wind would blow his footprints away even as he made them. No one would know.

It was too much. Five years had gone by, but not given him the strength to face something like that. He hadn't come here to look at bones. Leave that to the tourists. There was something else he had come to see. There was a face he had to stare into.

He turned and walked along the edge of the killing ground to the base of the new statue. It stood isolated, ruining the careful composition of the Syrtis Major Memorial. The stone woman was strong and stocky, with huge, thick hands, disproportionate to even her massive body. She stood almost naked, what was left of her clothing hanging from her in shreds. Despite the sagging softness of her breasts, they seemed to have the spiritual hardness of a Martian volcano, and contained no promise of pleasure. Hektor squinted, trying to see what pattern of chisel marks gave that impression, then gave up. Art was delusion.

Bertilla Li Prakrit. Schoolchildren now learned her story. They learned how Prakrit and her Nativist soldiers could have formed a credible alternative to the corrupt government that dominated Mars in those years. They learned how her name had been whispered everywhere, from council meetings to the deepest tunnels. They learned that she had been one of the dominating figures of that age. They learned how Mars had almost once been an independent state.

And he, Hektor Passman, had acquiesced in it all. The strength of Bertilla had rebuked the weakness of Hounslow, who had receded to the stature of a mere murderer. In another, nightmare, world, it would be Hounslow's statue that stood, head thrown back, above the scene of his crime.

Hektor walked around a corner of the plinth, and came upon his wife, Nyasa. She had come here separately, for her own reasons. Without saying anything, she rested a hand on his shoulder. Together, they looked out over the Memorial. Laia and Breyten. He'd long ago told her how Breyten met his death, and what Hounslow's fate had been. If she sometimes lit a candle for Breyten, well, that only made sense.

But now, standing and looking at the bones, he finally asked a question he had not asked for the four years of their marriage. "He never turned, did he?"

"Breyten? Even I can't say for sure, Hektor. Any more than you can. Any more than *he* probably could have. But I don't think so. His first loyalties were to his father, and to you. He wanted Hounslow's force to resist bravely, and be defeated, to serve us as a sign and something to live up to. Instead, he contributed to a bloody massacre."

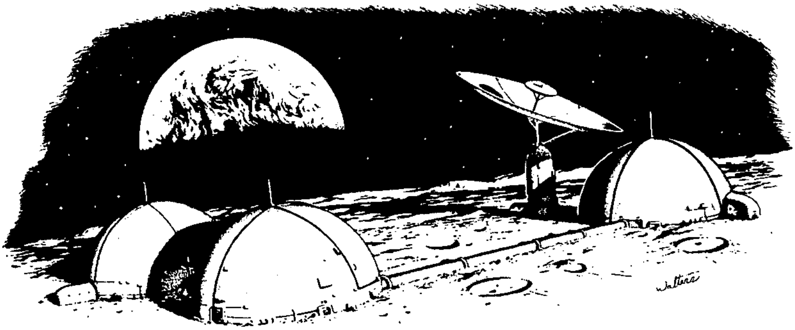
"Which has become a sign and something to live up to."

"Maybe." They'd both worked hard to make that true. It was the task of their marriage. Neither of them would ever know what had really happened between Breyten and Hounslow in those last hours. Had Hounslow been a coward and a criminal? They had only Breyten's mythopoeic imagination as evidence for that version. But it was the one that made sense.

"Let's go." A shuttle flashed its lights to show it was returning to the magtrack station. Nyasa, not waiting, slipped away from him. He didn't think they would ever come here together again.

Hektor leaned against the hard stone of Bertilla's plinth. Her stone shadow stretched across the sand. "Laia . . ." he whispered.

It was a calm day, so not even the wind answered him. ●



ON BOOKS

by Norman Spinrad

A BRITISH RENAISSANCE

White Queen
Gwyneth Jones
Tor Books, $19.95, 320 pp.
Aztec Century
Gary Jennings
Victor Gollancz
Take Back Plenty
Colin Greenland
Avon, $4.99
Against A Dark Background
Iain M. Banks
Bantam, $5.99, 515 pp.
New Worlds
Victor Gollancz

It's an ill wind that blows no good, or so they say, but for *whom?* The International winds of change have been blowing ill for the British publishing Industry, but the same factors causing the commercial woes of British publishers may be contributing to the current literary renaissance of British science fiction.

And such a British renaissance *has* been going on for a while now, recognizable, perhaps, only in retrospect.

Time was, along about the middle of the 1960s, when, creatively at least, the British tail was to a significant degree wagging the American dog. . . .

Prior to that New Wave period, the British science fiction that had crossed the ocean to achieve commercial success or other than recondite literary recognition in the United States was for the most part either pseudo-American or relentlessly Transatlantic, generalized Anglophone SF, you might say. Who cared if Eric Frank Russell or John Brunner or the Brian Aldiss of *Non-Stop* or *Hothouse* or for that matter the Aldous Huxley of *Brave New World* were British or not? How many American readers even knew?

True, there was a school of distinctly British disaster novels with distinctly British settings and a certain recognizably British attitude, typified by John Christopher's *No Blade of Grass* and John Wyndam's *Day of the Triffids*, and true too that these two books were hits in the United States. But by and large, Anglophone science fiction was blandly Transatlantic in those days, and since the American market was about three or four times larger than the Brtitish, that meant dominantly Yank.

Even though Anglophone publishing rights were divided up into British and American areas, British SF publishers made reprints of books that had achieved some success in the American market a staple of their own, and British SF writers who wished to avoid outside employment or the dole knew that they had to write stuff that was publishable in the United States.

The New Wave of the 1960s changed all that, at least for a while. A number of factors were at work.

In the macrocosm, Swinging London was one of the main metropoles of the Counterculture, the Counterculture itself was as British a phenomenon as American and idealistically transnational; indeed it was the Beatles who had largely created the whole thing by transforming American rock and roll into an instrument of mass countercultural awakening. Things British were chic in the United States, and Americans considered the British scene in many of the arts as a source of creative energy and cutting edge work, the crest of the evolutionary wave.

In the microcosm, Michael Moorcock had taken over the old established British science fiction magazine *New Worlds* from E. J. Carnell and turned it into a forthrightly experimental literary laboratory.

Moreover, Moorcock, like John W. Campbell, Jr., earlier on, had a vision of the sort of speculative fiction he would like to call into being, albeit a theoretical editorial framework far more complex than that of Campbell's scientific realism.

Moorcock's thesis was that contemporary so-called mainstream literature had mined its inherently limited vein of content into terminal exhaustion, that the devotees

GARDNER DOZOIS:
Editor
SHEILA WILLIAMS:
Executive Editor
IAN RANDAL STROCK:
Associate Editor
SCOTT L. TOWNER:
Associate Editor
JEAN TRAINA:
Design Director
TERRI CZECZKO:
Art Director
ANTHONY BARI:
Junior Designer
MARILYN ROBERTS:
Senior Production Manager
CAROLE DIXON:
Production Manager
CYNTHIA MANSON:
Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights
CONSTANCE SCARBOROUGH:
Contracts Manager
BARBARA PARROTT:
Director of Newsstand Circulation
BRUCE SCHWARTZ:
Director of Circulation Subscription Sales
LESLIE GUARNIERI:
Renewal and Billing Manager Subscription Sales
JUDY DORMAN:
Advertising Sales Manager

ISAAC ASIMOV:
Editorial Director
(1977-1992)

CHRISTOPH HAAS-HEYE:
President and Publisher
Dell Magazines

FRED SABLOFF:
Associate Publisher
Dell Magazines

JACK HOEFT
President and CEO
Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.

ADVERTISING OFFICES
NEW YORK
(212)782-8532

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
Dresner Direct, Inc. N.Y., N.Y. (212) 889-1078

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is *Asimov's*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Magaazines, 1540 Broadway, NY, NY 10036. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story.

of Leavis's Great Tradition had become, in the words of Thomas M. Disch, "corpses wired for sound." What literature in general needed to revive itself was a great blast of fresh air from science fiction's wealth of transcendental, transformational, evolutionary, widescreen, revolutionary material.

Mighty material that science fiction, however, tended to turn into little more than power-fantasies for teenage wankers in propeller beanies, as it skimmed along the phenomenological surface in straightforward transparent prose.

Or, in *my* terms at the time, mainstream fiction brought enormous technical skill and stylistic brilliance to the detailed examination of the lint in its own navel, whereas science fiction treated matters of genuine cosmic significance on an utterly trivial level.

If, however, the full panoply of literary tools of the mainstream, its depth of psychological seriousness, its technical virtues, were to be applied to the material of science fiction, and, contrariwise, if the people who customarily applied them to minimalist subject matter could be persuaded to consider speculative content, the result, at minimum, would be a truly adult speculative fiction, and at maximum a renovation of Anglophone letters at large.

That, chez Moorcock, was what the *New Wave* (a phrase coined not by him but by Judith Merril) was supposed to be all about—not merely a transformational movement *within* science fiction, but a movement to transform Anglophone literature itself *via* science fiction.

A tall order?

Better believe it!

And indeed, from today's perspective, we can see that while the New Wave succeeded in freeing science fiction from the strictures of commercial fiction aimed at adolescents, and while more serious work is being done within the genre than at any time in its history, speculative fiction has not exactly stormed the literary salons.

But the '60s were a madly braver age when anything seemed possible, and many SF writers on both sides of the Atlantic heeded this literary call to arms. The New Wave came to embrace, at least in the eyes of the SF establishment, a wide Transatlantic range of fiction—the sort of stories Moorcock was publishing in *New Worlds,* his own Jerry Cornelius cycle, J.G. Ballard's condensed novels, but also American novels like my own *Bug Jack Barron* and Thomas M. Disch's *Camp Concentration,* and notably the stories in Harlan Ellison's huge *Dangerous Visions* anthology, whose open invitation to writers was to produce work too daring to be published elsewhere.

Since most writers of non-standard speculative fiction were lumped together as the dreaded "New Wave" polluting the genre's vital bodily fluids by the SF traditionalists, a solidarity emerged among us on both sides of the Atlantic despite our widely differing creative angles of attack.

New Worlds serialized *Camp Concentration* and *Bug Jack Barron,* and published stories by Americans like Ellison, John Sladek, and Samuel R. Delany. American book editors, particularly George Ernsberger at Avon and Terry Carr at Ace, actively pursued cutting edge British novels.

So while Moorcock's maximalist goal of transforming Anglophone literature was never achieved, the bounds of the possible *within* speculative fiction were hugely expanded and deepened by this Transatlantic movement.

A movement that originated in Britain and was dominantly British-led.

That's the good news.

The bad news, at least for the next decade or two of British science fiction, is that there was another aspect to Moorcock's theoretical framework that may have led a generation of British SF writers of a somewhat lower level of genius than himself or J.G. Ballard up a creative blind alley that was to end up creating a Transatlantic schism only beginning to be bridged today.

Moorcock had some fascinating notions about the interface between prose and reality, difficult to summarize here, and, alas, even more difficult to bring off in fiction by writers much below the genius level.

The idea was that rather than *describe* the phenomenological surface of reality "realistically," prose could convey its inner landscape *allusively,* in the manner of poetry. And rather than simply using the prose-line to narrate a story as a linear sequence of events, one could blow a series of literary riffs around the "tune" of the plotline in the manner of jazz. Indeed, the basic "tune" could even be absent.

I *told* you it was difficult to describe.

So imagine what it's like to *write* this stuff!

In the hands of Moorcock, this technique produced the Jerry Cornelius cycle; in the hands of Ballard, the short stories he called "Condensed Novels" and novels like *Crash;* in the hands of Brian Aldiss *Barefoot in the Head*; in the hands of D.M. Thomas (whose poetry was published in *New Worlds* long before he became a best-selling novelist) *The White Hotel*. . . .

Fiction whose plot is hard to put your finger on, whose characters remain enigmatic, whose reality is as illusive as it is allusive, whose best effects do not necessarily address the conscious mind—fiction that is not an easy light read, but which amply repays the diligent reader.

Unfortunately, this is not exactly a formula for commercial success.

Worse still, in the hands of secondary writers or outright poseurs, and in the absence of any theme of significance or story to tell or emotional involvement with character, it *can* become a formula for the production of high-falutin' elegantly written empty literary bullshit.

In the United States, the Great SF Boom of the 1970s transformed the SF genre into a "major publishing profit center," meaning that even literarily successful work whose appreciation required too much intellectual effort to garner a mass audience became more and more marginalized.

As for pretentious baloney that merely *simulated* same, who needed it? Certainly American publishers weren't about to *import* such stuff!

British SF publishers, on the other hand, became quite enamored of American imports. The American publishers were publishing many more SF titles a year than the British could hope or care to, so they could pick and choose among already published work that had proven, at least to some extent, its worth on the booming American SF market.

Moreoever, thanks to the larger advances, the production of so many wannabe SF writers by the workshop phenomenon, the consequent Darwinian ferocity of the struggle for publication, and the ever-growing emphasis on the bottom line by American SF publishers, American SF writers were more oriented toward producing commercially viable action-adventure product than their British colleagues.

Much of the best of whom were still pursuing the ambitious literary vectors of the New Wave, and much of the rest tending to produce the abstruse, emotionally uninvolving, plotless stuff resulting from the degeneration of Moorcockian and Ballardian theory into a formula for the production of empty pseudo-literature.

Admittedly, the above is an overview in extremis; British publishers were still publishing some British writers, American publishers were still publishing some good books by American writers.

But however true or false this perception was, SF publishers on both sides of the Atlantic tended to believe it. With a few exceptions, British writers were no longer considered commercially viable on the American market, and, worse still, were being frozen out of their home market by American imports, which *British* publishers considered more commercially viable as well.

But if market forces taketh away, so too do they giveth upon occasion, as both Thatcherites and Reaganoids would contend, if not always according to the best-laid plans thereof.

Several years ago, in an ironically named "Consent Decree" issued by an American court as the outcome of a legal battle too complex to describe here, world English language rights were divided into three parts: the exclusive American rights area (the U.S., Canada, and the Philippines), the exclusive British rights area (the UK, various members of the British Commonwealth and associated states) and the so-called Open Market (the rest of the world).

The U.S. and British publishers had the exclusive right to sell their books in their respective areas, but the Open Market became a free-for-all.

The major beneficiaries were the American publishers, whose unit costs and hence cover prices were lower and therefore more competitive, and British writers, at least to some extent.

Why British writers?

Because they started to look a bit better commercially to British publishers. If a British publisher *originated* a novel rather than reprinting an American book, it could beat the Americans into the Open Market; indeed, since British publishers customarily retained control of American rights when dealing with British authors, they could delay the appearance of any American edition to suit themselves.

A marginal effect at that point, maybe, but the beginning of the recovery of their home market by British writers, the commercial underpinning of the current renaissance in British science fiction.

Then, a bit later, Australia unilaterally decided that British publishers would lose copyright protection for their editions under local law if the British books didn't hit the Australian market within thirty days of the American edition.

Australia, several British SF publishing executives told me, represents 30 percent of their market, so this is serious stuff. What it means, as American writers are finding out to their discomfort, is that if the British don't think they can get out their edition of your book within thirty days of the American editions, they probably can't publish it at all. Buying reprint rights to American SF that has already been published is no longer economically viable.

Worse still, from the point of view of the British publishing industry, is the fear that the single market now in effect in the EC will allow American publishers to invade *Britain itself.*

It's perfectly legal for the Yanks to ship their books to Open Market countries like, say, the Netherlands, from which the Common Market rules would allow them to reship their product to Britain. If this becomes common practice, American writers will probably not be able to sell separate British rights at all, and the British publishing industry will be in deep dark shit indeed. Thus far, attempts to get the European Commission to avert this impending catastrophe have fallen on deaf ears.

The result of all this in the microcosm of science fiction is that, for commercial reasons, British SF publishers have, during the course of the last few years, evolved a stepwise more receptive attitude toward British authors.

And, human nature being what it is, have begun to develop an idealistic rationalization for this commercially driven shift—to wit that British SF publishers and readers have for too long allowed their own home-written SF to be swamped by an avalanche of increasingly cynical, increasingly series-oriented, increasingly schlocky American product.

Writers being human too, this more nurturative editorial attitude seems to have suffused the British SF scene with new creative energy, or at least hope. Then too, perhaps the years in the relative commercial wilderness have tempered esthetic extremism with more attention to certain necessary traditional values like story, character, and ideational content.

Fittingly enough, nowhere is this more readily apparent than in the first two volumes of the latest incarnation of *New Worlds*. It might be going too far to say that *New Worlds* has long *been* the soul of British science fiction, but certainly not that it has long expressed the state thereof.

A quality middle of the road digest in the pre-Moorcock period under E.J. Carnell, it metamorphosed into an experimental slick and the energetic center of a movement that transformed science fiction during the height of the New Wave era. As the New Wave and with it the peak of creative energy in British SF began to wane, the magazine became a series of original anthologies edited by diverse hands, finally lapsing into silence in 1976. Two years later, it was revived for a few issues as a kind of semi-prozine done for love in memory of the good old days, once more edited by diverse hands, only to disappear entirely throughout the British eclipse of the 1980s.

And now, *New Worlds* has been revived once more as the sigil of the British renaissance of the 1990s in the form of a trade paperback anthology series published by long-time SF publishing house Victor Gollancz and edited by David Garnett, under the patronage of Moorcock as "Consulting Editor."

It's hardly possible to deny that the history of *New Worlds* is the history of post-war British science fiction in microcosm.

If so, then there is reason to hope that the British renaissance is real, for these two volumes edited by Garnett are in some ways the best two numbers ever, a mighty renewal of this battle-scarred old warrior.

Certainly the range of fiction here is impressive, wider than in any previous incarnation.

All the way from "Colour," a long, allusive meditation by Moorcock on entropy and chaos that would not have been out of place in the *New Worlds* of his editorship, to Stephen Baxter's "Inherit the Earth," a rather straightforward piece of science fiction perhaps a bit too immediately reminiscent of James Blish's famous "Surface Tension," which would not be out of place in Stanley Schmidt's *Analog* (or for that matter, Campbell's), and much more in between. . . .

Two very strong novelettes by Ian McDonald, already a major talent, at least at this length, which artfully sculpt ambiguous and psychically allusive stories around solid scientific armatures: nanotech-generated immortality in "The Innocents," the genetic engineering and electronic augmentation of animal species in "Floating Dogs."

"Übermensch!" by Kim Newman, in which the story of an alternate Nazi Superman becomes something more than the sort of straightforward send-up the material might lead you to expect.

A brace of Brian Aldiss stories: "FOAM," a fairly standard science fiction tale of character based on memory-theft and artificial amnesia, and "Ratbird," a much more powerful, disturbing, allusive, mystical stylistic tour-de-force.

Two contrasting stories by American author Paul Di Filippo, who by now has rather quietly evolved into one of the most interesting short story writers in the field: "Any Major Dude," yet another tale of nanotechnical transformationalism, well-written in more or less conventional prose and steeped in a sort of futuristic Mediterranean atmosphere reminiscent of Lucius Shepard or certain recent Moorcock; and "Brain Wars," a nicely nasty piece of semi-surrealistic semi-humor in which the message most certainly is the medium.

Also "Great Breakthroughs in Darkness," by another American, Marc Laidlaw, an alternate Victorian scientific send-up in the form of encyclopedia entries; Storm Constantine's overt homage to Pat Cadigan, "Immaculate"; Jack Deighton's somewhat cynical Martian terraforming tale "The Face of the Waters"; and so forth, and so on, including work by Ian Watson and Philip K. Dick and enough essays by Moorcock, Garnett, John Clute, and David Langford to give the effect of a real magazine in book form.

The general level of literary quality and the sophistication of the writing in these two volumes of original fiction is at least as high as that in the average "SF Year's Best" book, something one might expect from the latest incarnation of *New Worlds,* with its reputation for emphasis on style and form.

What one might not expect is such a broad range of good stories, so much straightforward science fiction, so much not-standard writing successfully applied to the rendering of solid thematic material and so little pretentious experimentalism for its own sake—in short such a well-balanced smorgasbord of all that can be done within the wide realm of speculative fiction in the 1990s.

More encouraging still is the way these writers have not only pushed the boundaries of the various subspecies of SF but become embracing and inclusive, recombined them to enrich the gene pool of the whole, become writers of speculative fiction, period.

There's much more real scientific speculation here than most of us have come to think typical of British SF, let alone the *New Worlds* school, though generally properly subordinated to story and character. There's the expected dose of experimental prose, but here in the service primarily of lucidly enhanced immediacy rather than obfuscation. Humorous stories on serious themes, serious stories with humorous moments. Even Moorcock's novella enriches its temporal ambiguities and allusive surface with a solid story, a Conradian concreteness to the metaphorical landscape, a bit as if Lucius Shepard were rewriting a melange of William Burroughs and Lawrence Durrell.

What it all seems to be saying is that the war between the British New Wave and all the various aspects of the old science fiction tradition, between Outer Space and Inner Space, between scientific speculation and psychic exploration, between American plot-orientation and British atmospherics, between transparent and allusive prose, is over.

And everybody won.

If these two volumes are representative of the current creative state of British science fiction, Anglophone SF in general may be the beneficiary of another British-led renovation, which, from whatever source, the genre—with its commercial pressures to produce schlock, its endless series, its lack of real literary excitement, its loss of its own sense of history via the disappearance of the backlist classics, its eroding spiritual core—sorely needs just now.

Perhaps all those years wandering in the commercial wilderness taught British science fiction writers that there damn well *better* be more idealistic reasons to write this stuff than the garnering of big advances, slots on the best-seller lists, Hugos, and plush life-styles, seeing as how, by and large, they weren't getting any.

But on the other hand, the economically driven turn toward British writers on the part of British publishers of late has perhaps played a part in teaching them that story, character, emotional involvement on the part of both writer and reader, are not just cynical commercial tricks but legitimate elements of most successful fiction, even experimental fiction, even fiction with an allusive surface, and that serious intellectual speculation of the scientific and/or philosophical sort is not only central to the thematic heart of speculative fiction, but the ideal content for speculative prose.

Take *White Queen* by Gwyneth Jones, one of the slowly increasing number of British science fiction novels that *are* achieving American publication.

The science fictional premise here is pretty standard—aliens land at several locales on a relatively near future Earth, muck around with human culture and individual humans, and turn out to be not quite what they seem.

The settings are mostly European and African, post-post colonial, post-greenhouse, and are rendered in telling physical, political, psychic, and spiritual detail, largely through the viewpoint of jaded, sophisticated, somewhat cynical British newswoman Braemar Wilson.

The core of the novel, more or less, is the story of her peripatetic love affair, if that's what you want to call it, with a newsman of a somewhat different sort, an American exile, Johnny Guglioli, himself the object of an alien's sexual fixation, as if Jones is making a referential nod to the old British tradition of giving the Yank market a homeboy to root for.

But not really.

The sensibility of this novel is forthrightly European, perhaps somewhat less obviously British; one would not imagine many Americans writing about the relationship between the First World and the Third, between America and Europe, with quite this mixture of jaundiced cynicism and understated idealistic outrage, with what Brian Aldiss has called a "decent sense of despair."

Yet the novel is most assuredly *not* de-energized or attenuated by this civilized European world-weariness. It does *not* lapse into the sort of lack of sharp speculative focus, plotline tension, and vivid accumulation of world-building detail, that this attitude has too often come to imply for the American science fiction reader.

White Queen has those so-called "American" virtues and more.

Much more.

It has *really* alien aliens. These aliens are so alien, though seeming rather human in physical form, that I could not begin to sharply delineate their nature here, seeing as how their true nature remains illusive and allusive throughout the novel.

They're telepathic . . . well, not exactly. They're immortal . . . well sort of, hive-minded . . . in a way, and what one does to Johnny sexually and why is, uh, well, *alien* and not quite comprehensible to him or to the reader. . . .

What did you expect?

They're *aliens*.

They're *real* aliens. Jones convinces you that, yes, this is what a confrontation between humans and real aliens would really be like, would really *feel* like.

Her aliens are smarter than we are in some ways, though maybe not so smart in others. They're sophisticated enough to manipulate our media and our culture pretty well, even though they don't really understand it the way we do. Their internal lives are as complex and morally ambiguous as ours, and though at times the human characters may think they understand, they're really only perceiving the phenomenological surface. And the same is true of the aliens' perception of human reality.

After all, that's all we really *can* perceive of actual intelligent aliens, beings who are not simply us in monster suits, or they of us. Yes, Jones does give us their internal stream of consciousness from time to time, but in *their* terms, not ours, and those terms are rendered so allusively as to make them seem even stranger.

On a speculative, psychological, political, and social level, *White Queen* is a meticulously and realistically detailed science fiction novel written with an unusually sophisticated sensibility.

But, paradoxically, it achieves its effect of rendering aliens "realistically" by dealing with them in prose that is as ambiguous, allusive, and non-transparent as *they* are.

Old fashioned sense of wonder, the Inner Space of a confrontation with *real* aliens from Outer Space, you might say, delivered via a literary technique undreamt of by John W. Campbell or Hal Clement.

Aztec Century by Christopher Evans, on the other hand, is a solid more or less traditional alternate world novel written in transparent prose, and perhaps the only thing that marks it as British work is that much of it is set in an Aztec-ruled modern Britain and that the first-person narrator, Princess Catherine, is an heiress to the British throne. Probably not a viewpoint character many American writers would adopt, let alone bring off convincingly.

I'm afraid I'm going to have to get a little personal here in order to be honest about my slight disappointment with this novel, for what disappoints me about *Aztec Century* is something that will probably be a strength to most readers. And *Aztec Century,* though not entirely satisfying to my admittedly idiosyncratic taste, is the best SF novel about the Aztecs that I've read, though admittedly there hasn't been all that much.

The thing of it is, I've long been fascinated by the Aztecs. Having read my Bernal Diaz, having studied Aztec lore and consciousness for years, having devoured Gary Jennings's massive *Aztec,* surely the best straight historical novel on the subject, I opened *Aztec Century* eager to see what a writer of speculative fiction would make of a modern technological world dominated by the Aztecs.

I mean, the Aztecs were *weird,* weirder, in some ways, than even Gwyneth Jones's aliens.

The well-known ritual slaughter of thousands of captives to the Sun God was merely the phenomenological surface; the metaphysical justification for it was something even stranger. Teams played a game that was something like soccer and something like basketball, knowing that the winning team got sacrificed, and they played to *win.* Young couples got to play king and queen for a year, and then their hearts were ripped out with obsidian knives, and they accepted all this with genuine mystical enthusiasm. The royal cuisine was as complex as that at the Chinese imperial court, and they had a hundred recipes for currying *people.* They had a metaphysical and spiritual framework in which all this was virtuous and it made good sense in its own terms.

So take this totally alien human culture, evolve it a few centuries, turn it technological, make it the dominant power in a world otherwise about on the level of our own, and *what* will it turn into?

Evans's answer is that though the Aztecs herein are never conquered by Cortez and their empire continues, spreads, goes on to dominate the world and develop the highest technology on the planet, their culture becomes rather highly influenced by Europe, Christianized, even.

Okay, he makes me believe it. He's probably right. He's done his homework, his latter-day Aztec culture, though still authoritarian and imperial, is on balance not all that unattractive, and many of his Aztec characters are not only convincingly three-dimensional but sympathetic, as seen through the first-person viewpoint of Princess Catherine.

Frankly, books like *Aztec Century* are one of the problems of being a novelist and a critic at the same time.

My only carp with it is that it isn't the Aztec novel *I* would write if I could ever figure out how, namely one that gets inside the consciousness of the Aztecs themselves and extrapolates it a few centuries into a high technological civilization in which its full weirdness (to us) has proceeded along its own vector, rather than converged with that of Europe toward some reasonable middle ground with which the contemporary reader can far more readily empathize.

But that's the novelist talking, not the critic, and a novelist who has no present idea of how to make such a thing comprehensible at all at that. Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.

For *Aztec Century,* the book that Christopher Evans *has* written, is an excellent, solid, alternate novel about the long-term confrontation and subtle melding of European and Aztec cultures.

And there's a touch of, well, genius, in the way Evans actually extrapolates an Aztec-European *pop* culture—TV shows, commercials, fast food chains, and all—knowing that nothing will convey psychological depth and reality better than this.

The sort of solid work that deserves the Hugo and Nebula nominations it probably won't get unless some American publisher picks it up.

Colin Greenland's *Take Back Plenty,* on the other hand, is a British novel that has already been published in the United States, and has won both the Arthur C. Clarke and British Science Fiction Association awards for best science fiction novel of the year.

A novel which, moreover, seems to have crystallized or perhaps generated an entirely unexpected trend: the renewal of the hoariest and one would have thought most moribund of SF traditions, the space opera.

That's right, the British science fiction community, that supposed bastion of uncommercial, overliterary, pretentious SF—at least according to the last decade or so's consensus opinion among American publishers—has given its two major awards to an all-out old-fashioned full bore space opera!

Well, sort of.

Take Back Plenty is indeed the tale of plucky spaceship captain Tabitha Jute and her doughty tramp-spaceship-cum-sidekick *Alice,* as the two of them thud and blunder along with a cast of colorful human and non-human allies through a solar system awash in alien races from the stars by the dozens, battling Capellan masters or their various proxies, from the steaming monster-infested swamps of Venus to the ultimate confrontation with the masters of Plenty, the artificial habitat of the title, at Charon, hard on the boundary that the Capellans have placed around the worlds of men, and. . . .

Beetle-browed throwback to the days of *Planet Stories,* Doc Smith, and World Wrecker Hamilton? No, not quite.

Satire of same? Not really.

For that, see "Corsairs of the Second Ether," by Warwick Colvin, Jr., in Garnett's *New Worlds 2,* a send-up of such stuff in the form of three teeny-tiny episodes of some endless idiot serial surrounded by gigantic and incomprehensible plot-summaries.

So what is Colin Greenland *really* about in *Take Back Plenty*?

Take Back Plenty is the point novel of a rather peculiar trend that began in Britain, probably with this book, and now seems poised to leap the Atlantic—the renewal of the space opera genre via a kind of post-modern sensibility.

Almost camp, but not quite. Enlivened by a kind of humor, but definitely not satire. Forthrightly intended as entertainment, but not really for dim adolescents.

Space opera that *knows* it's space opera, you might say, and expects its readers to know it too.

The original space opera of the thirties, forties, maybe as late as the fifties, pretended to exist on the same reality-level as other more seriously intended extrapolative science fiction; that is, the conceit was, at least so far as the mostly adolescent readership was concerned, that all this outrageous stuff, the weird aliens, the Martian canals, the giant Swamp Lizards of Venus, the Giant Green Bugs of Jupiter, existed in the realm of the possible.

Greenland doesn't do that here.

Several years ago, Brian Aldiss edited an anthology called *Farewell, Fantastic Venus,* a nostalgic good-bye to all those tales of the swampy water world rendered obsolete by the hard dry searing astronomical facts.

A decade or so later, Greenland's attitude is "If I want a bloody swamp on Venus, I'll bloody well have one!"

Why not? It's a *space opera,* isn't it? It's a *novel.*

Greenland makes no attempt whatever to justify his swamp-world Venus crawling with loathsome uglies within the framework of current scientific knowledge, nor any of the other such pulp SF elements that might get in the way of the story.

Take Back Plenty is *not* serious realistic science fiction by any reasonable definition. But it isn't satire or camp either.

If you'd say there's not much else left for it to be but fantasy, you'd be more or less right.

The original naïve space opera of the thirties, forties, and fifties *was* really fantasy in science fiction clothing too, but it pretended otherwise.

But *Take Back Plenty* is space opera that *knows* it's fantasy and *admits* it, as exemplified by Greenland's total lack of any mumbo-jumbo attempting to justify his entirely non-realistic Venus or the *canals* he puts on Mars, for that matter.

Thus, what Greenland has written is a kind of breezy, light, yet somehow quite sincere latter-day space opera that allows the secret adolescent taste for such stuff in most of us to guiltlessly enjoy the inventiveness, flash, and color of his thoroughly unrealistic baroque solar system precisely *because* it doesn't insult the adult intelligence by pretending to be more than it is.

Literature? Not really. Entertainment? For sure. Is there a legitimate place for such stuff in the SF canon?

Now there is. And this is it.

The fact that a British writer has delineated it and the British science fiction community that has supported Moorcock, Ballard, *New Worlds, Interzone,* and so forth has acclaimed its advent is a sign of a new sense of post-modern catholicism; in a strange way, therefore, a sign of maturity.

Another sign of a new level of maturity emerging in Britain, this one yet to appear in the United States, is the career of Iain M. Banks, aka Iain Banks.

Say what?

Yes, it's the same Scottish writer, who puts his middle initial on his science fiction, and leaves it off his mainstream novels. Banks is sui generis, the only writer I can think of who, from the very outset of his career, has successfully published more or less straightforward mainstream novels like *The Wasp Factory, Canal Dreams,* and *Espedair Street,* and unabashed science fiction like *Consider Phlebas, Use of Weapons,* and now *Against a Dark Background.*

In Britain, some of Banks's mainstream novels have flirted with best-sellerdom, though nothing much seems to have happened with them in the United States. In Britain, Banks's science fiction places him in the front rank, and as a science fiction writer, at least, he *is* starting to make his reputation in the States.

A plot summary would make *Against a Dark Background* sound like something of a space opera too. Sharrow, the heroine, or more precisely, perhaps, the protagonist, is a commercial mercenary of the planet Golter, and the long, complex, action-oriented plot revolves around her efforts, and those of members of her old combat team, to find a kind of ultimate weapon called the Lazy Gun before the minions of a cult called the Huhsz find *her* and fulfill their vow to kill her for complex backstory reasons involving familial politics. . . .

The whole long novel proceeds across the face of Golter along this vector, and to other bodies in the Golterian systems as well, battles, ambushes, betrayals, atrocities, vengeance, escape, and so forth. . . .

However . . .

However, this is one novel whose title is at least quadruply significant.

On an astronomical level, *Against a Dark Background* refers to the fact that Golter's sun is a lonely star in a vast dark void out in the galactic boonies. The humans of Golter (and it's simply a given that they got there somehow) can stare across it at the starry main, but, given Banks's lack of hyperspacial gimmickry here, they know they can never cross the void.

On a cultural level, *Against a Dark Background* refers to what happens to a people confined in this bottle of a solar system, millennium after millennium. Civilizations rise and fall and rise again, ruins pile upon ruins, balkanization proceeds apace, religions appear and disappear, the present becomes a vast historical and technological midden where rediscovery of the past has long since become more fruitful than inventing the future.

On a characterological level, *Against a Dark Background* refers to the kind of people such a culture will tend to produce, people like Sharrow and her mercenary compeers, her strange cousin, Geis, the Huhsz. . . .

Finally, on a fictional level, the title tells you, perhaps, admirably enough, only in retrospect, that Banks ain't kidding, he warned you up front, this is a *dark* novel.

For Sharrow is a *realistic* action-adventure heroine; that is, she does the sort of things that such characters do in space opera, but she's a product of long dark Golterian history, and characterologically, she's what an actual mercenary soldier, assassin, and rather casual killer would really have to be. Lots and lots of people get killed in this novel, and not all of them are the bad guys, though who the good guys are, or indeed whether there really are any, is not something that Banks deals with here in black and white terms. Various shades of gray on black is more like it, you might say. . . .

Thus, in a way, *Take Back Plenty* and *Against a Dark Background* can serve both as bookends for the five-foot shelf representing the current state of the renaissance of British science fiction, and, paradoxically, together as a kind of radical middle—self-conscious space opera that admits that it's fantasy and entertainment on one side of the shelf, and a novel that shows what can be done by applying psychological and cultural realism and mordant irony to rather similar material on the other.

Another word for "middle" is "center," and that, I think, is what British science fiction has begun to recreate of late—a strong, diverse, literarily adventurous but commercially viable center around which all sorts of things can successfully cohere.

Dare we hope that *this* can cross the Atlantic?

Certainly the creatively unfocused market-oriented genre that American "SF" has become sorely needs to recover some sense of central spirit too. ●

THE NOT-SO-GRIM REAPER

Classified Marketplace

IA APRIL '94

ASIMOV/ANALOG combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $4.80 per word—payable in advance—($72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Judy Dorman, DELL MAGAZINES, 1540 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10168-0035.

ART AND DESIGN

ART PRINTS AND POSTERS BY KEITH PARKINSON. For information on prints by Parkinson and other artists, contact SHADOW GRAPHICS, P.O. Box 199, Lititz, PA 17543.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

100,000 science fiction and mystery paperbacks, magazines, hardcovers. Free catalogs! Pandora's, Box Z-54, Neche, ND 58265.

CATALOGS AND DIRECTORIES

FREE Catalog of Science Fiction magazines, books, and paperbacks. Collections also purchased. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, Indiana 46032.

GIFTS

Chain mail jewelry, belts, keychains, custom work. Self addressed, stamped envelope for information. The Unicorn Woman, Box 595, Lillian, TX 76061-0595.

PERSONAL

BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE BRITISH GENTLEMEN seek friendship, romance & marriage with American ladies & gentlemen! All ages! Free details: ENGLISH ROSE INTRODUCTIONS, (Dept. 123), Suite 2, 24, Cecil Square, Margate, Kent, CT9 1BA, ENGLAND. TEL: 01144-843-290735.

In The Future...

YOUR

Classified/Display

AD
CAN BE
PLACED HERE

For details
SF CLASSIFIED
1540 Broadway
New York, N.Y. 10036
(212) 782-8549

For Greater Savings...Results...and Profits...

PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR SPECIAL COMBINATIONS:
Combo #1, Combo #2, Combo #3

Each combination is designed to give your ad the largest audience available.

Each combination offers you a Special Discount Rate.
For further information write to Judy Dorman
Dell Magazines, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036.

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The 1996 World SF Convention has set its rates (1994 and 1995 will be back later). Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me as Filthy Pierre.

MARCH 1994

4-6—**World Horror Convention.** For info, write: **Box 60008, Phoenix AZ 85082.** Or phone: **(602) 841-5153 or 945-6890** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Phoenix AZ (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Charles Grant, Dan Simmons, Edward Bryant, Gahan Wilson.

4-6—**AstronomiCon. (716) 342-4697.** Radisson Inn, Rochester NY. Jack Chalker, K. Freas, J. Finder.

4-6—**ConSonance.** Airport Radisson, San Jose CA. L. Warner, "Dr. Jane" Robinson. SF folksinging.

4-6—**WisCon. (608) 233-8850.** Holiday Inn Southeast, Madison, WI. K. Fowler, M. Snodgrass, Frenkel.

4-6—**ConFlation. (314) 385-2875.** Radisson Clayton, St. Louis MO. Aviva, Stan (Shado) Schober.

4-6—**VulKon.** See VulKon below. Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. Commercial Star Trek event (guests TBA).

6-7—**MicroCon.** Exeter University Union, Exeter UK. Colin Greenland. No more info at press time.

11-13—**InterCon. (703) 912-9877.** Dulles Airport Days Inn near Washington DC. Live-action gaming.

11-13—**Bash. (617) 894-2782.** Sheraton Tara, Braintree MA. S. El Fadil, Nigel Bennett. Star Trek.

11-13—**Space Access.** Grace Inn Ahwatukee, Phoenix AZ. Niven, Pournelle, Stine, rocket engineers.

11-13—**RevelCon. (713) 526-5625.** Houston TX. Media oriented (SF & other). Age statement asked.

16-20—**ICFA, 500 NW 20th, HU-50, B-9, FL Atl. U., Boca Raton FL 33431. (717) 532-1495.** Academic.

18-20—**VulKon, 12237 SW 50, Cooper City FL 33330. (305) 457-3465.** Atlanta GA. See VulKon above.

18-20—**LunaCon, Box 3566, Church St. Stn., New York NY 10008.** Hilton, Rye Brook NY. McIntyre.

18-20—**ConTact, Box 506, Capitola CA 95010 (800) 787-2010.**

18-20—**Creation, 530 Riverdale Dr., Glendale CA 91204. (818) 409-0960.** Pasadena, CA. Commercial.

19-21—**RhinoCon, Box 151, Ailsa Craig ON N0M 1A0.** Judith Merril, Phyllis Gotlieb, K. MacLean.

19-21—**Economy, % PSIFA, UHSU, U. of Herts., Hatfield Herts. AL10 9AB, UK.** Storm Constantine.

25-27—**MilleniCon, Box 636, Dayton OH 45405. (513) 275-6027.** Stouffer Center Plaza. Larry Niven.

25-27—**MidSouthCon, Box 22749, Memphis TN 38122. (901) 274-7355.** Airport Hotel. Hambly, Elmore.

26-28—**Action, 12 Seville Cres., Ashford TW15 1SX, United Kingdom.** Moat House, Shepperton UK.

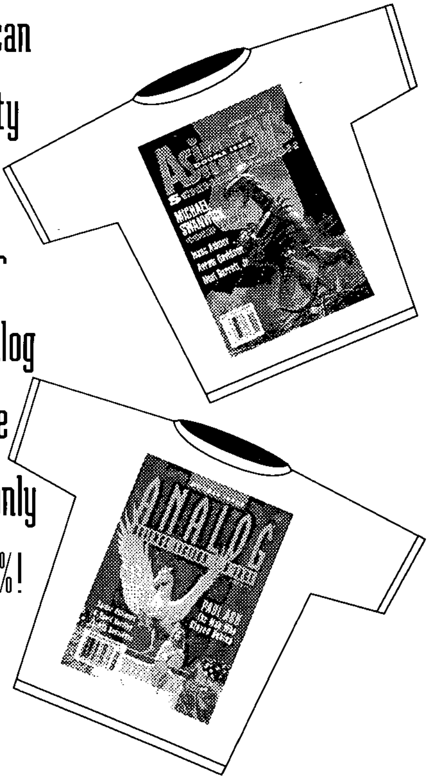
AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**LA Con III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409.** Anaheim CA. The WorldCon. $75 to 8/15/94.

ATTENTION

SCIENCE FICTION FANS!

Now, for a **limited time** only, you can purchase these exciting, high quality Analog and/or Asimov's T-shirts. For only $15.95 you can receive your choice of T-shirt with either the Analog cover or the Asimov's cover. Or take two T-shirts, any combination, for only $25.00. That's a savings of over 21%! But don't delay—our quantities are limited and are going fast!



TO GET IN ON THIS TERIFFIC OFFER JUST SEND YOUR CHECK OR MONEY ORDER TO

DELL MAGAZINES
P.O. BOX 40
VERNON, N.J. 07462

Please allow 4-6 weeks for delivery. One size fits all.

MAAS-9

MAIL ORDER MALL

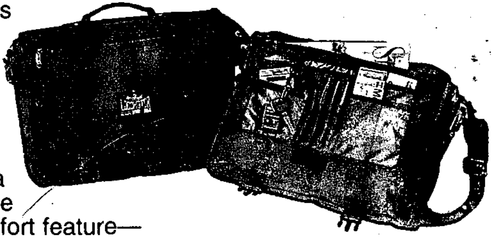
CALL TOLL FREE 1-800-722-9999

THE MAGICAL SPARE BED

It's almost like pulling an extra bed out of a hat. Unlike most spare beds that gobble up storage space and are unwieldy to move, this one rolls down to fit a 36"-long, 3"-diameter canvas case, to stash in a closet corner, car trunk, camper, anywhere. Yet it unrolls in minutes to a full-size 27"x73" bed that will even accommodate 6-footers. The secret's in the inventive construction: a cotton canvas sling is supported on laminated steel legs for cushioning and stability on rough ground. Toss the carrying strap over your shoulder and go—camping, beach, poolside, the 10" legs keep it off damp ground and sand. This bed is indispensable at home, country home, dorm—even for kids in motel rooms. A superb value at $61.98 ($12.25) #A1931.

EVERYTHING BAG—BY LOCOMOTOR

People on the go always have so much to carry around, but the expandable portfolio bag by Locomotor makes it a snap to keep everything in place. This roomy (17"x14") bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant black canvas material and features eleven spacious extra pockets (2 with zippers) and 4 slots for pens. Plus, a unique zipper design enables the bag's main compartment to expand to more than double its normal width—to a full seven inches. Adjustable wide shoulder strap provides a real comfort feature—or carry the bag by the durable handle. This black Locomotor Bag lets you keep it all together whenever you are on the go. #A2057—$26.98 ($5.75).



TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL** DEPT 044AS, P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999.** NJ residents add 7% sales tax. We honor MasterCard, Visa, and American Express. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. **30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund.**